

A Tale of Slayers

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Summary: A new Slayer is called. Giles must find out which of his Slayers has died. Faith or Buffy?

1. Prologue to Part 8

Buffy The Vampire Slayer

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part 00 by Joseph B.

Disclaimer: I acknowledge the fact that I am not even worthy enough to stand in Joss Whedon's driveway, much less the curb in front of his house, but that doesn't stop me from cutting across his lawn every once in a while.....

To the metaphorically-challenged --lawyers, who take these things so seriously-- Joss's da man --he owns all copyrighted characters-- and I'm not. Just the shmoe who wrote the story.

Dedications: To the people of the Slayer's Fanfic for being cool enough to come up with their cool sight and to all the fanfic writers *even they whose stories I have yet to read* for inspiring me to take Joss's characters and play with them *at least until he takes them away from me.*

And of course to Sarah Michelle Gellar, just because.....

Giles: "Previously, on `Buffy the Vampire Slayer . . .'"

I'm just so used to hearing that line before an episode, but I actually wish I could show some cool clips of the show. This is the best I can do however. . .

Author's note: this story takes place after "Amends" and before "Gingerbread." I started writing this story shortly after "Helpless" aired in January, when Faith was still a likable character. Onto the story. . .

Before.....

Rupert Giles dropped the phone and slammed his hand on the cradle, disconnecting the line, as he grabbed up the receiver again. Frantically, he dialed in the number he knew better than his own home number and was whispering a single word over and over as he listened to the line ringing on the other end.

"Please, please, please, please....."

He stopped abruptly as the line was picked up. "Hello! Joyce! It's Giles.... Yes, I'm terribly sorry to call at such, uh, an inappropriate time, but there is some what of an emergency and I really need to speak to Buffy. What? She isn't home? No, no! I knew she would be patrolling late tonight, I apologize. I, uh, should have remembered. Oh, no! Nothing to worry about, I'm meeting her here in the morning. What? No, no, I'm at the library. Yes, I'm afraid I had to pull an all niter but there really is no cause for alarm. No, it can wait a few hours. Sorry to wake you, goodnight."

As soon as he replaced the receiver it was back against his ear again and he was practically pounding the numbers now. He just stood there, in his office, eyes darting around but he was seeing nothing as he was totally focused on the ringing on the other end.

"Please, be there, Faith...."

Then he froze when a recording cut in: "We're sorry, the number you have reached is no longer in--"

He dropped the receiver but missed the cradle and it fell to the floor allowing the emotionless recording to continue, but Giles was already out of his office having grabbed his coat and was walking determinedly out of the library when the double doors opened.

He froze once more.

"Hey, Giles," Buffy Summers said as she walked to him. "I was finishing my patrol when I saw the light in your office still on so decided to check in. I'm afraid there was no sign of Tangerine--"

"Oranstine," Giles corrected automatically, staring at her with wide eyes.

"Listerine, whatever. Anyway he was a no show, but there was a stray vampire that I took care of. I think I may have broken my previous time on fastest vampire kill, so be sure to put that in your journal so you can shove it in the faces of all the other Watchers in the Watchers old folks home-- and why are you staring? Do I still have ash on my face?"

Giles let out his breath and embraced her in a huge hug, much to Buffy's surprise. "Oh, thank God." But before the Slayer could overcome her confusion, Giles drew away from her, a hand covering his face. "Oh, God!"

"Giles, what is it?" Buffy demanded, unnerved at seeing the tears in

his eyes he was trying to hide. He suddenly seemed very weak and Buffy actually held on to his arm and guided him to the table. Somehow she was able to get him to a chair before he collapsed.

"Giles, you just succeeded in scaring me more in ten seconds than even the Master was able to," she commented.

He now had both hands covering his face and Buffy could tell he was trying to collect himself, not wanting to fall completely apart in front of his Slayer. His glasses were askew over his fingers and she slipped them off, folding them carefully, holding them for him. She felt like pleading, or yelling at him, to tell her what was causing him so much pain. She hadn't seen him this way since Ms. Calendar.....

"What happened?" she whispered.

"The, uh, Council..." he began, looking up at her.

"Watcher old guys," she nodded her understanding, urging him to go on.

"They just informed me that, uh," he cleared his throat. "That the next..... Slayer has just been called."

Silence settled between them as his words sank in. It was broken by a small shattering noise that sounded loud in the quiet library, but neither of them noticed the twisted wire frame and bits of glass Buffy was holding in her clenched fist.

"But, if the next Slayer has been called," she said numbly.

"And then when I saw you...." he trailed off. He steeled himself as he said, "Faith is dead."

* * * *

With a great gasp, Faith took in a harsh lungful of air. She was unable to release it for a moment and when she finally did it came out as a ravaged cough. Her insides were burning as she labored for another breath and continued to cough. Her eyes were open but the racking heaves kept darkness dancing in front of her vision. Then she became aware of someone stroking a hand over her hair.

"There, there, now," she heard a voice say. "You're okay. Everything is fine. Shhhhhh....."

For a while Faith just didn't move. She blinked her eyes rapidly, trying to clear them, but the darkness would not go away. This frightened her. She did not understand why but she suddenly needed to be in the light, the sun, some place where she could feel warmth on her skin. She realized she was shivering and curled up on whatever surface she was laying on. It was smooth and hard and cold beneath her. So very cold.

She opened her mouth to say something, anything to confirm to herself that she was alive. Why was that suddenly so important to her? She heard a low guttural moan and a second later realized it was coming from her.

Squeezing her eyes shut, releasing tears, she whimpered; something she had sworn to herself long ago she would never do, and could not stop. But she managed to but anger into her sobs, the rage she always kept simmering under the surface, where it shielded and protected her. It was gone when she had awakened.

Awaken? Somehow she didn't think she had just been pulled from a deep sleep. No. Something had happened to her. Something bad, she just knew. But now that she had found her fire again she held onto it, tightly, desperately, as if her life depended on it. Which, for some reason, she knew it did.

She felt the hand still stroking her hair gently. She flinched, but there was no strength in her movements. She felt completely drained, she felt-- she felt dead.

"Shhhhh," the soft voice was saying. "You are safe, little one. There is nothing to fear now."

The voice, that of a stranger, calmed her. Faith stopped moving and just laid there, curled tight, but could not stop shivering.

"....cold...." she said, weakly in a voice she hardly recognized as her own.

The hand stopped stroking her hair, which she instantly missed, and a moment later something thick and warm was spread over her body. The hand returned to stroking her hair and she was glad.

Faith struggled to compose herself; Giles would laugh if he knew that, she thought. She needed to take in her surroundings, find out where she was, what had happened to her, and what to do once she accomplished the first three.

Her Slayer senses were slowly coming back to her, if not her strength; nor the warmth to her body, but she sensed something very close. Something very dark. Was in fact Darkness, not the absence of light, the Darkness the Slayer Handbook spoke so often about. And it frightened her, frightened her in a way she had not felt since Kakistos had been after her. A darkness she had just been pulled from. Thankfully, she had no recollection of being in the Darkness but that did little to comfort her.

Faith opened her eyes again and found she could see. Her vision was blurry but quickly began to clear and her keen sight kicked in. She was in some sort of chamber. It had no real walls, its sides were made out of rock, like inside a cave. There were even torches ablazed on each side, but the chamber remained in a deathly gloom with deep shadows.

She turned her gaze up at the person who continued to stroke her hair. The person was wearing a dark robe with a wide hood, which, thanks to the shadows, hid the face completely from Faith.

"Where....." she began, her voice still very weak.

The person's other hand came to Faith's mouth and pressed a delicate

finger to her lips. "Shhhh. Child. No questions. All will be as it was when you wake up."

"I..." the young Slayer struggled. "...don't want....sleep..."

"Yes, you must, child. You need your rest."

"No...." Faith desperately needed to get up. She knew that she must not remain here. But her strength was gone. She could hardly raise her head and the robed figure easily, but gently, kept her from moving.

She stopped her struggles when a piercing scream shattered through the chamber. The robed figure quickly moved away from Faith, turning its back to her and the Slayer saw it approach another table several feet away from the one she was on. There was someone lying on it. She tried to raise herself again, but only managed to lift her head a few inches from the hard surface.

Faith saw it was a young girl, her age, probably a year younger. She watched as the robed figure did the same hair stroking comforting to the girl, whispering softly to her. Faith wondered what had happened to her? Why were they both in this dingy place? They must be underground or in one of the many networks of caves surrounding the outskirts of Sunnydale. The girl looked to be in pain and she continued to scream. Fortunately, for the girl, it seemed that the pain lessened, for her screams began to fade. She settled back flat on the table but kept making a hissing sound through her teeth, as if fighting against something, something only she could see under her closed eyes.

Faith's heart caught in her throat as the girl suddenly growled, a nocturnal sound she was all too familiar with, that she heard quite often during her patrols and in her dreams at night. And her Slayer sense confirmed it as well.

The girl was a vampire.

But she didn't feel like any vampire Faith had ever sensed before. Maybe it was because she was so weak, but there was something about this vampire that was extremely.....not right.

But whatever she was, she was a vampire and Faith needed to get out of there now!

Adrenaline moving like molasses through her veins, it still gave her the strength to push herself up from the table -- and fall to a heap on the ground. The robed figure whirled around as Faith untangled herself from the thick blanket, but she was not moving fast enough! The robed figure called out across the chamber and two more figures hurried into the room from an entrance Faith could not see. They were tall and built, like any good goon squad, but she could sense they were not vampire. She wasn't about to call them human, but she was sure they were not vampires.

Kicking the blanket away, just as the first one reached her, she used the same kick to connect with his kneecap. But, despite her Slayer strength, the kick was too weak to elicit more than a grunt from him and they reached down and effortlessly pulled her up.

"Lemme go...." she tried to shout, but her voice was still weak as well. "Bastards! What did you do to me?"

Securely restrained, the guards were just as much keeping her on her feet since they felt like jelly and could hardly hold her weight. The robed figure turned to face the Slayer pulling the hood back to reveal itself. Faith tried to contain the gasp that sprang from her lungs.

"Why," the figure began, "we just completed an experiment, my young Slayer."

Struggling, more for show than anything else, Faith seethed, "Why do all you evil types gotta talk like the Emperor from Star Wars?"

The figure laughed. "All you Slayers. You are so much alike. So young, so head-strong, so fragile." The last it said with a sneer. "But now things will be different." It stepped aside, waving an open hand toward the young vampire on the table. "The experiment was a success."

Faith looked at the young vampire. She knew the vamp was newly raised but she was still receiving funky vibes from it. She just didn't know what to make of it all. The vampire sat up and its eyes focused on Faith and there was a -- power; Faith could call it nothing else, behind those eyes. Vampires all had the same animal tinted gleam that glistened from their hunger, even the soul-ridden Angel had that gleam. But there was something added to that gaze in this vampire's eyes, something that made Faith even more afraid. Somehow she knew she had the answer, but she refused to let herself see it. Instead she turned to the robed figure.

"What have you done?" she demanded.

It smiled at her and said, "My dear Vampire Slayer, meet our *Vampire* Slayer."

End of Part 00

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part One

CHAPTER ONE

Next.....

"Faith!" Buffy called, as she rushed into Faith's motel room. The door was unlocked, as it usually was, considering Faith thought of herself as her own security system. Or maybe she just lost the key, Buffy thought.

Giles was right behind her and they made a quick sweep of the small room, Buffy the obvious choice to check the bathroom. She joined Giles once more to see him standing by the bed holding up the ripped cord of the phone line. Their eyes met for a contemplating moment before he let the cord drop and they surveyed the room again, more thoroughly.

The bed was a shambles, but Buffy did not know if that was normal of Faith, and the rest of the room did not say much as if a struggle

took place here recently. But the dead phone spoke volumes.

"Some one was in here." Giles finally said.

"But who?" Buffy asked. She knew they were both thinking the same things, after two years they had developed a certain level of understanding; at least in situations like this, anyway. But voicing those thoughts often let them see things from different angles.

"Vampires?" Giles offered.

"No ashes," she answered, even though that was obvious to Giles as well. "Even if they surprised her, Faith would have managed to take out a few of them before they could overpower her. Slayers die hard, Giles. Kendra took a few with her when--" she stopped herself.

"And I doubt she would have invited them in, in the first place," Giles said quickly.

"That didn't stop Kakistos from smashing his way into her room when he found her."

"But, remember, Faith was on her way out, planning to leave town at the time. In a sense, I doubt she really thought of her room as her home. She's been in 'this' room for months now and it has become her home."

"So, no vampires," Buffy affirmed. "Who does that leave?"

"Demons?"

"Poor devils, they're always blamed for everything. Intolerance is worst than ever.

"They didn't bleed her," she said. "There's not a drop of blood anywhere, so she didn't bleed them either."

"She may not have had the chance." Giles allowed himself to sit on his younger Slayer's bed, where she must have been sleeping hours earlier before--

Buffy was still worried about him. Back at the library, he had managed to pull himself together quickly, so they could rush over here in his hunk of metal on tires he tried to convince everyone was a car. But she could see him wearing around the edges. She realized she was playing his role, right now. The one who held everything and everyone together. She was the center where you could turn to for strength. Giles was here, with her, functioning, at the moment, but he was wounded. Hurting.

Nearly two years ago, when everyone in close proximity of the Hellmouth had been living out their nightmares; the high school and the surrounding neighborhood, Xander and Willow had later revealed to her what had been Giles' worst nightmare. And that was to lose his Slayer. Shame filled her as she realized she had not been there for him after Kendra had died. Even though they only had the chance to know the stoic young Slayer for a few months she and Giles seemed to click right from the beginning. He had not been her Watcher, but Buffy knew he felt responsible for Kendra, since she had been in his

territory, probably blamed himself more than Buffy did herself for her death. When it came to responsibility Giles was fearless.

"But who would've known she was here?" Buffy said, trying to keep Giles with her.

Her Watcher did not disappoint. "I could not imagine. That new chap, Mr. Trick, certainly knows who you both are and, I'm afraid, your address is not exactly top secret, Buffy. But Faith is a little harder to find. Slayers usually can sense whenever any paranormal presence is close by, so following you would be a chore for--"

He raised his head, meeting her gaze, and a second later understanding swept through her.

"Demons and monsters did not do this," she said with soft rage. "Whether they were behind this or not, humans stormed in here and grabbed her."

"Humans are not as difficult to handle as monsters and demons," Giles said, "even many of them. Not for a Slayer."

They both knew the truth, but they still needed to reason it all together, to make it real.

Buffy said, "But humans are more cunning; lacking the strength of vampires and monsters, they have to be. They would have come in with weapons."

"And with no blood," Giles said.

"Tranquilizers, or stun guns," Buffy finished.

"So they knew what Faith was."

Buffy felt her rage building inside and her fist was trembling, hidden under the long sleeve of her oversize leather jacket. She really needed to hit something hard.

She jumped, startled, when Giles suddenly slammed his closed fist down on the night stand knocking the lamp off. It was so loud that Buffy knew he just injured it, even though the fury in his expression gave no hint of the pain.

"Giles!" She rushed over to him and reached for his hand. He pulled away but she caught his wrist. "Let me see!" She looked at his hand. "My God, what did you do!" At least her Watcher had the courtesy to look embarrassed.

"Well, now you did it, young man," Buffy even wagged a finger at him for good measure. "Now we need to get some ice on this fast." Giles was about to say something, but she quickly said, "And not another word from you. Do you hear?"

Despite everything, Giles almost smiled, and he was suddenly feeling the pain now.

"You're not going to be any good if you hurt yourself." Buffy was searching the room again. "How do you expect to help Faith! We don't know for sure that she is dead."

"The Council--"

Buffy cut him off. "No! The Council can say whatever they want. Until I see Faith's body I'm not about to take their word for it. I have never even met the Council, and we Slayers are supposed to be their whole reason for existing! I've only trusted two people I called 'my Watcher' and Merrick is dead! And I'm not about to trade you in just yet, Giles!"

She finally found what she was searching for; the ice bucket, half sticking out from under the bed. She headed for the door. "So I need you to hold together." She chuckled. "Do you really want *me* to be the rational one during this crisis?"

She closed the door as she went off to find the ice machine, leaving Giles behind speechless.

End of Part One

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Two

CHAPTER TWO

Buffy was fuming as she stalked down the sidewalk of the building. Damn it, Giles, she thought. Please don't make me have to worry about you, too! She was at least convinced that he wasn't about to pull a vengeance crusade like he did when Ms. Calendar was murdered. But that time, he'd known who the culprit was and he would have died if she hadn't reached him in time.

They were going to find the bastards, she vowed, and if Faith was dead Buffy was going to send them to join her. It wouldn't matter if some of them were human; the Slayer rule prohibiting the killing of humans be damned, they would die.

It was just worse when humans were evil. At least vampires and other demons were incarnations of evil itself. Humans couldn't point at evil and say "the Devil made me do it." You just do not turn other humans over to the monsters. That rule just had to be in the Slayer Handbook, she thought, but as yet, Giles had not even shown the book to her telling her that it would be of no use in her case.

Buffy suddenly stopped walking. "Where the hell is the ice machine?"

Taking off his long coat, Giles figured he might as well clean himself up. He tossed it across the bed and was turning toward the bathroom when he saw the lamp still lying on the floor. Chiding himself for his outburst he bent to pick it up and replaced it in its original spot on the stand.

That's when his eye caught something on the floor between the bed and the night stand. Wincing slightly from the pain in his hand, he moved the stand and picked it up.

Even without his glasses his blood ran cold when he examined the familiar object.

"My, God," he whispered. "Buffy!" he shouted, as he ran for the door.

Buffy finally found the elusive ice machine in the small hallway in the center of the building. She had her second scoop of ice in the bucket when she heard a faint shout. She dropped the scoop and brushed her hair behind her ear. She thought she had heard Giles' voice. And then she did hear a door slamming. She started back to the room, hoping there was nothing to worry about.

She hadn't taken two steps when she heard a crackle behind her and a jolt hit her in the shoulder blade. She was spun to the wall by the shock and her cheek hit the concrete as her chest slammed against it. Buffy staggered back, the world swimming, and her knees started to buckle, but her fighting instincts were taking over demanding her body respond to the danger.

As she fell, Buffy twisted, swinging the bucket of ice in the direction from where the shock came and made contact. Ice cubes exploded from the bent plastic bucket and she saw someone in black; looked like fatigues; go down the same time she did. Her assailant had dropped his weapon, and she saw it was a stun baton.

"Hellooo, nurse," she said, through clenched teeth. "I was just about to come looking for you."

Feeling weak, she was pushing herself off the ground when she was grabbed by a pair of strong hands, jerked up, and slammed against the wall again, this time with her back. Before she could sink back down, a heavy booted leg kick her across the midsection, making her gasp. Buffy bent forward, hugging her middle, and hands grabbed her jacket and shoved her into the ice machine. Protecting her head, she took the impact on her shoulder and leaned against it, turning to face her second attacker. But a large fist filled her vision and sent her spinning further down the hall. She managed to keep her feet this time, and regained her balance. There was another fist coming at her face. Buffy brought her hand up and it slapped into her open palm, stopping dead.

Buffy stared into the wide eyes looking at her from under a ninja-like ski mask and said, "My turn!"

The man flew several feet above the ground and over his partner; who was starting to get to his feet, and landed very painfully on his back at the mouth of the hall.

Right at Giles' feet. He stepped over the prone body and entered the hallway as Buffy approached the first attacker.

The goon grabbed up the stun baton and swung at the Slayer. Buffy caught it, snatched it away, and shattered it against the wall in the same movement, never taking her eyes from him as she grabbed the front of his army vest in her fist and slammed him against the wall.

"Where's Faith?" she demanded.

He replied by swinging at her face. She easily blocked it with her free forearm, then slammed him against the wall again.

"Where is she?"

He tried to kick her, but she raised a knee to block it.

Practically bouncing him off the wall now, she shouted, "Damn it, stop that! And tell me what you've done to Faith!" The goon was thoroughly seeing triple images now, and Buffy was the only thing keeping him on his feet.

Giles had reached them. "He won't tell you, Buffy." He held something up for her to see. "Recognize this?"

Buffy saw what he was holding. She released her attacker-now-victim, no longer paying him any attention as he fell on his face. She took the ring from her Watcher and ran a finger over the face design.

"The Order of Taraka," she said.

"It would appear they've found a new employer who wants both Slayers."

"But they weren't trying to kill me," she said. "They came at me with stun guns. Last time they tried to kill me as soon as they saw me. And these two are only human."

"I suspect they were left behind to guard over the area just in case you or I, as Faith's Watcher, showed up. Considering that they only left *two* behind would indicate they were expecting me."

"I guess it was lucky I decided to check in with you then. We caught 'em off guard." She smiled, after thinking about it. "I like that. I still haven't even things up for the hell we went through the last time."

Giles looked out toward the entrance as they started to hear voices floating their way. "We best take our leave now, Buffy. We don't want to have to waste time explaining all this to the authorities. Let's circle 'round back and return for the car."

"We still need ice for your hand." She snatched up the ruined plastic bucket and tried to restore its original shape. She quickly scooped out some ice. She used the scoop to point at the barely conscious goon. "Are you sure he won't say anything if we torture him?"

Giles started to give her a look that said 'how could you even consider doing such a thing?' but then his expression changed and Buffy knew he was actually giving it some thought. With genuine regret, he said, "No, I'm afraid not."

"Bummer." She dropped the scoop back in the ice machine and was about to start following him, but then stopped. Setting down the bucket, she snatch up the scoop again, with ice, rushed over to kneel by the goon, and grabbed him behind the collar.

She lifted him so her face was close to his. "Tell your master we're coming for him!" And with that she dumped the ice down his bare back and let him go.

"Buffy!" Giles hissed, from the end of the hall.

"Coming!" she replied cheerfully, retrieving the bucket of ice dropping several cubes as she ran to catch up.

Just as the first witnesses reached the hallway to discover the masked men. One out cold, the other writhing weakly on the ground, clawing at his back.

End of Part Two

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Three

CHAPTER THREE

Giles had his hand resting in the battered bucket of ice as his eyes kept darting to the street and back at Buffy, repeatedly in quick succession. Buffy was behind the wheel looking as if she had been doing this for years. Giles saw the excited gleam in her eyes, of someone who was still new to driving, and he was glad she found joy in such a mundane task. So often, he forgot that the seventeen year old was still a teenager under all the battle-hardened experience.

Which is why he did his best to hide his anxiety as she took corners fifteen miles faster than she should have, especially since there was usually a stop sign at them.

Buffy spared a glance at him and he tried to smile a bit, too late. She rolled her eyes. "Giles, if you didn't want me to drive then you shouldn't have hurt your hand."

"And I sit chastised, believe me," he said the last with a little more emphasis. To his relief, Buffy kept her eyes on the road.

"Besides, it wouldn't be a bad idea for the Slayer to have her own car. A vehicle to get her to the demons much faster and not be late to rescue some one on the vampire nightly menu. After all, if Batman can have his 'mobile why can't I?"

"But it would have to have a cool name. `Slayermobile?" She shook her head. "Nah. Slaymobile?" She grimaced. "Even worse. Sounds like Santa's car."

Giles allowed her to go on. Even though she was delighted to be behind the wheel of any car; even one as decrepit and older than she was, he could still see the tension underneath. He knew she, like the others-- Slayerettes, as they often called themselves-- kept up the light banter as a way of dealing with the severity and danger they faced almost on a nightly basis. But sometimes it was difficult for him to tell if they were actually taking matters seriously.

"Stakecoach," Buffy exclaimed. "But that's more suited for the Slayer in the Old West."

But he had to admit, that the children rarely let him down. Of course, it was more for Buffy's benefit that they committed themselves to the cause and risked their lives for one another, as her friends, than to help Giles. In fact, he knew the Council frowned

upon his unorthodox methods of dealing with his Slayer. Or, as they fondly referred to as, 'controlling' the Slayer. As if such a concept were possible, he thought. Allowing the Slayer to have friends, no less letting them find out who she was. The Council never made their disapproval of him apparent but Giles was not fooled. They would congratulate him on the achievements of his Slayer, or Slayers, as the case may be, but then would not hesitate to offer their own opinions to him. He always accepted their words with his usual graciousness, but when he would suggest they offer their advice to the Slayers personally they would find a way to, just as graciously, decline.

Giles hoped he was wrong, but he had a nagging sense that something untoward was just on the horizon in the Council's regard for him. Or for his Slayers. Maybe they felt he was actually failing in his duty. But then again, he thought, if Faith was dead they may not be far off the mark.

"Giles."

"Hmmm?" Giles raised his head, not even realizing it had started to droop.

"Welcome back, Giles," Buffy said, looking at him.

"Sorry." He straightened in his seat.

"Don't be. You've had a longer night than usual. I'd say you should take a nap, but we're here."

Giles saw they had pulled up along the curb of the lonely Crawford Street. It was rimmed with tall trees on both sides but they were able to see the secluded old mansion, which was Angel's current address. Many conflicting emotions swept through him as he gazed at the mansion. He was still unclear when it came to the soulful vampire. His brain told him that the soul trapped in the vampire body was not the cold-blooded demon who had killed Jenny Calendar last year. But his heart first saw the face of her murderer whenever he thought of, or saw, Angel.

And when Giles had opened his front door to find Angel standing there, a few days before Christmas Eve, Giles hated to reflect how close he really came to putting a crossbow bolt into his heart after inviting him in. Even through his anger, he recognized the young man-- relatively speaking-- he had known prior to Buffy's seventeenth birthday. He had considered Angel a friend back then, maybe he still did, for the lad was the same soul before the demon had retaken him, but Giles knew things could never be the same between them. He glanced at Buffy. Just as they would never be the same between Angel and Buffy.

Buffy looked at him for a moment. "Uh, you don't have to go in, Giles. I'm just gonna go in there and tell Angel what has happened and then you and me can go beat up Willie 'the Snitch,' and find out what he knows." She gave him a smile. "How does that sound?"

"Thank you, Buffy," he said, with a nod. "But my only concern right now is Faith. And if Angel can help us, then we should both be there to ask for his assistance."

After a second, she said, "Okay."

They got out and started their way up to the mansion. It was one of the longest walks Giles had taken.

They circled to the back of the mansion since Angel stayed mostly on that side of the house, and climbed down the stone steps leading to the atrium. The vegetation was a little overgrown but it was still lovely; despite the memories it held for Buffy, but it seemed like Angel did tend to his home. And she was getting better at keeping her own place tidy, but she winced as she recalled the state she had left her room in. She still couldn't figure out how he had managed to restore some of the electricity to the place.

As they approached the back entrance; where the pair of newly repaired French doors --thanks to a certain Slayer duo-- stood open, they noticed Angel had the fireplace going, as he usually did. They were just in reach of the partially opened curtains when they became aware of the voices inside.

Exchanging a look, Buffy and Giles stayed quiet and crept closer. They were both wondering what sort of company somebody like Angel could have and they peeked around the edge.

They saw the vampire in question sitting on the sofa, not exactly looking relaxed; leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. His attention was on the tall man standing by the fire. Buffy saw he was handsome in a rugged if-Tom Cruise-ever-lost-his-boyish-looks sorta way. And he seemed to favor Angel's style in dress. Wearing a long trench coat, black pants, and boots. Angel, himself was just wearing a black tank top and the sweats he probably put on after waking up.

Buffy quickly chased away the image of Angel getting out of bed to focus on the conversation.

"You really picked a bad place to spend a vacation," Angel was saying. "I know the Hellmouth calls to everyone but you don't have to listen to it."

The man; obvious to Buffy and Giles that he was not human; maybe a vampire? she thought, looked over his shoulder and gave Angel a smile.

"I did not come here to see the Hellmouth." He moved toward the couch. "I came here to see you, *mon ami*."

Angel looked at him, no expression. "Why?"

The way the man looked at Angel baffled her. It looked almost like affection. Angel and this guy obviously went back a ways, but how far?

"I had heard Angelus was back," he said, standing in front of the vampire now. "I needed to see for myself."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Oran."

She heard Giles draw in a breath. "Oranstone," he whispered.

Buffy looked at him. "Are you sure?"

"How many Oran's can there be whom are acquainted with vampires?"

"Point taken like a stake."

"You are my friend as well, Angel," Oranstone said.

"Angel was-- I-- was never your friend," Angel said, sternly.

Oranstone's smile grew. "When you start referring to yourself in the third person, I always know you are uncomfortable." He reached a hand to Angel and Buffy's jaw dropped as he caressed her former boyfriend's cheek. "Or perhaps it is this form you are not comfortable with."

The hand on Angel's cheek suddenly lost mass and became delicate and smooth, and she and Giles could only gape at the form of the woman who was standing in the spot where Oranstone had been, wearing his clothes, which fitted her a little loosely now.

"Is that better?" she asked the vampire.

"Of course," Giles said behind her.

"Of course, what?" she asked. "What's the course?"

"Oranstone is the Two-Faced Demon. I didn't realize the title was meant literally."

Buffy said nothing and just watched as the lady Oranstone leaned down, lowering her lips towards Angel's. Angel stood up, not hurried, and walked the long way around the coffee table away from the demon.

"You used to welcome my company," Oranstone said, not miffed by the evasion.

Angel had picked up the andiron and was rousing the fire, but did not look back as he replied. "That was almost a century ago, Oran."

"And now things are different?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I see." Oranstone raised the hand she had touched him with to her lips and breathed deeply through her nose. "Ah, I do see. My little Angel has found love! Not even Angelus in all his conquests could find this feeling; while his sired, Drucilla and Spike, found their own twisted love for each other."

Angel looked at the demon, trying to keep his expression passive, but Buffy saw the pain in his eyes. It mirrored the pain she held in her own heart. The thought of never being able to hold Angel the way they had held each other the night of her seventeenth birthday; the way they had loved each other, was a double-edge sword that cut them both.

"You saw Spike and Drucilla?" Angel asked, trying to change the focus of attention.

"About fifty years ago, in Spain." Oran smiled. "Of course, they did not recognize me. They do not know me the way you do, Angel. Me and Spike actually became 'buds' for awhile." She chuckled. "We did have some times, though. But, alas, we had a falling out."

Angel really didn't seem to care, but he looked at least curious. "What happened?"

"Oh, I tried to seduce Drucilla."

"I bet Spike did not take that very well."

"No. That he did not. He actually came very close to killing me. If he had known that I wasn't a vampire he may not have bothered to try to eviscerate my heart. Did he really face two Slayers and defeat them both?"

Angel turned away. "I don't think you should stay here very long, Oran. This town is not exactly a safe place for vampires and demons."

"You mean the Slayer?"

Angel looked up sharply.

"Don't act so surprised, Angel. There's hardly a vamp, or demon, who does not yet know this is the Slayer's hometown. Unfortunately, most of them cannot resist the power of the Hellmouth. Whether this Slayer realizes it or not, she is the spider in the Hellmouth's web."

"I've been called worse," Buffy whispered.

"In fact," Oranstone went on, "I've heard this town has two Slayers."

"Is that it?" Angel asked sharply. "Is that why you're here?"

"Not directly." Oranstone moved closer to Angel. "I was rather curious of the stories I have been hearing about the Slayer having allies to assist her in her battles against evil. But more interesting, was that it was said one of those allies was a vampire." She used a finger to trace an invisible line from Angel's chin down his neck and to his chest. "A cursed vampire with a tortured soul. Could it be that the love you have is for this Slayer? This little girl?"

Buffy felt her temperature rise a few degrees, and she was suddenly glad that she already had a reason to kill this demon. She thought that it may be about time to make their presence known. But she stopped herself with Angel's response.

"Jealous?" he snapped.

Oranstone looked into his eyes and smiled broadly. "Oh, there you are, Angelus!"

Buffy just watched as Angel suddenly cold cocked the demonic bitch right in the face. And she knew he hadn't been holding back. This was rage, and having been on the receiving end several times she knew precisely how much power was behind that punch. And she knew where the anger was coming from, as well. Just a couple of weeks ago, Angel had decided it would be best to walk out into the sunrise than ever risk letting his demon take over his body again. Buffy'd had a hard time trying to convince him his life still meant something to the world, and Buffy was not only glad she could kill this demon, but was now looking forward to it. But the blow sent Oranstone back just a few steps before she regained her balance and smiled again.

This worried Buffy. Not many inhumans could take a punch like that from Angel and just smile back at him. But the demon made no move to retaliate.

"Such passion," Oranstone said. "The love you feel pales the love Spike and Drucilla have."

"You better leave, now." Angel seemed to have gained control of his fury, but it was still there just under the surface. "Leave town."

"I've never known you to challenge me, Angel."

The demon sounded amused, which served to further infuriate the Slayer and Buffy decided that enough was enough.

Stepping through the curtains, Giles right behind her, she said, "I believe he just asked you nicely to leave!"

"Ah, the Slayer," Oranstone said, not at all surprised. Damn, Buffy thought. She sure did hate it when her grand entrances fell flat on stage.

Angel however was surprised. "Buffy."

"Hello, Angel."

Despite the demonic presence in the house, Angel suddenly felt awkward having Giles in his home. "Giles," he greeted.

The Watcher nodded to him, but it was clear the bulk of his attention was on the Two-Faced demon. He addressed the demon. "Oranstone, I presume." She nodded. "No wonder we have been put to task at documenting your travels throughout history. What with you versatile visage."

Buffy narrowed her eyebrows. "Now try saying that ten times real fast."

The demon smiled condescendingly at her. "What an amusing child."

Buffy suddenly reached fever pitch.

"I wouldn't get her angry if I were you, Oran," Angel warned.

"Oh, it's too late for that."

"I've seen her like this. Now, would be a good time to leave."

"Uh-uh," Buffy stood directly in front of the doorway. "I have some questions I need to ask your 'little' friend, Angel."

Oranstone no longer looked amused and she crossed her arms as she regarded Buffy. "And just how may I help you, Slayer?"

Buffy gazed at her with cold eyes. "Did you bring the Order of Taraka to Sunnydale?"

Angel shot a look of surprise at her. She never took her gaze off the demon, but he received a nod from Giles.

"No," Oranstone said.

"Why don't I believe you?" Buffy fumed.

"Oh, could it be that I'm a demon and all you Slayers have an automatic grudge against our kind?"

"Yep," Buffy nodded. "That'll do it."

"What's happened, Buffy?" asked Angel.

She answered, not taking her eyes off Oranstone. "The Order of Taraka abducted Faith. Perhaps, even killed her already."

Angel stepped closer to the demon. "Oran, do you know anything about this?"

"Why should I know something about this?"

Buffy sneered. "Oh, I don't know. Could it be that you're a demon! And your kind seem to hang out together."

"You must admit that it is an odd coincidence that a group of demonic assassins show up roughly the same time that the Two-Faced Demon arrives into town," Giles offered.

"So, I'm the prime suspect."

"And getting pricier with each second." Buffy started to move towards the demon. Giles stayed right behind her. Angel took a step behind the demon's shoulder. Oranstone took the situation with a stoic expression.

"As I told *our* Angel," Oranstone said, "I did not come here for you, Slayer. It was merely a personal visit."

"Somehow, I doubt that," snapped Buffy.

Oranstone shrugged. "Suit yourself. Now, if you'll excuse me...."

The demon started to walk a path to take her around Buffy, but the young Slayer moved directly in front of her. She looked the girl in the eye and Buffy backed down not an inch.

Before Oranstine could speak, Buffy put in, "If you're about to say something like 'you have no idea what you're dealing with,' save it! I have heard it all before, and believe me when I say I have some very wild ideas. After the year I've just had you'll have to do something very big to get my attention." She put her hands on her hips. "So, go ahead. Impress me."

Oranstine regarded her for several seconds, neither one flinching. Slowly, a small grin appeared on the demon's face and her voice was dripping with serious.

"And what a glorious battle it would have been." This made Buffy frown, and before she could respond, Oranstine went on. "You might want to look around some of the caves close to the harbor." She looked over her shoulder at Angel. "When I arrived, I felt a gathered aura of mystical energies that could have been from your demonic group of assassins."

Buffy glanced at Angel. The vampire said, "I believe her, Buffy."

Oranstine smiled and turned her gaze back to the Slayer as if to say, "Satisfied."

"Why?" Buffy asked. "Why help us at all?"

"I have never had a qualm with any Slayer throughout my existence. Humans just really hold no interest for me."

"But you are a demon, remember?"

"Yes, and as such, I do unspeakable and evil things just as all demons do." Buffy tensed slightly, readying for attack. "But I get no satisfaction with the suffering of humans. No challenge." At the look Buffy gave her she smiled and added, "Til now, of course."

"If you don't target humans, then who -- ?" Buffy stopped herself and looked at Angel again. His expression gave away nothing but his eyes told her all she needed to know.

"You're sick," she said with venom.

"Is it any different than you humans killing each other?" Oranstine asked in a mild tone.

"And I just bet you're real popular with the other monsters?"

"Popular enough so that some of them actually hired the Order of Taraka on her head," Angel informed them.

"So you did bring them here!" Buffy declared.

"No. Not at all. Two hundred years ago, I was their bounty, and for a decade they followed me where ever I went. I'm sure I killed half their ranks before they finally gave up on me. Even to this day, their numbers have not recovered."

"The Order of Taraka does not give up until they've collected their

bounty," Giles spoke up.

Oranstine nodded. "You are correct, Watcher. But they did collect their bounty. They finally took my head." She smiled as she spied their faces. "Oh, I grew another. It was much more convenient than trying to get it back."

Buffy was speechless. She looked at Angel and saw that he believed what the demon said. Obviously, this was the first time he'd heard this story. She quickly found her voice.

"All right. We appreciate the information. In return, we'll leave you alone, provided you jump on the next barge out of the country."

"I'll agree to leave Sunnydale. Anything else would require further `negotiation.'"

Buffy didn't like the sound of that, but her only other choice would be to kill the demon. And she wasn't sure if she could actually do it. Normally, she wouldn't be so hesitant, and Angel was here to assist her, odds that were usually in her favor. But Oranstine did succeed in giving her a wiggins, just with the shapechanging alone; and if the Order of Taraka couldn't kill it--. On top of all that, her primary mission was to find Faith, and she couldn't do that if she was dead or incapacitated.

Without a word, Buffy stepped aside. Oranstine bowed her head slightly and walked by. When she was halfway outside she turned. "'The Two-Faced Demon.' Is that what they're calling me now?"

"That is the more popular name for you," Giles answered.

The demon smiled at them. "You have no idea." She glanced at Buffy. "Sorry. I had to say it. Because. . .you really don't."

With that, she stepped out into the night.

End of Part Three

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Four

CHAPTER FOUR

Buffy walked up to Angel but stopped herself before her hand started rising to touch his shoulder. Ever since Angel got better, and especially after he regained all his strength, they took extra care whenever they were close to each other. Thankfully, he didn't need her constant attention anymore and they didn't see each other as often, which was better for both of them. At least, that's what Buffy told herself. . . for comfort? She would have frowned at her own strange take on logic if she were alone.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Gazing down into her eyes, he said, "Yeah."

"I guess you get to meet a lot of interesting people in two and half centuries." She smiled. "So you and Oranstine are old friends?"

"I wouldn't exactly call us `friends.'"

"She seemed pleasant enough to you, from where I stood."

"Were you spying on me?" There was no accusation in his voice, but the words still hurt.

"I like to think of it as `looking out for a friend.'"

Looking into her eyes, he knew she was telling him the truth. "Thank you. But she wouldn't have harmed me."

"Why is that?" Giles asked.

Angel met the Watcher's gaze. "Because I have my soul back."

They did not say anything else to each other and the silence began to linger. Buffy spoke up. "She said she was both yours and Angelus' friend. What did she mean by that?"

"If I were still Angelus she would have attacked me, or tried to hold me captive. There's no love lost between those two."

"So what she said about not preying on humans is true?" Giles asked.

"To an extent. When she wants to infiltrate into the vampire ranks; such as with Spike and Drucilla, she would take on a vampire appearance to hunt, and feed on, humans just to keep up the act. She would have no regrets afterward, but she won't kill humans if she doesn't have to."

"But she can't turn anyone into a vampire, can she?" Giles sounded fascinated.

"No. Only real vampires possess that ability."

Buffy stared into the fireplace. "I shouldn't have let her leave."

"I understand how you feel, Buffy," Giles said, as he took a step closer. "The idea of allowing a monster --any monster-- to go free is not at all appealing to me, either." He praised himself for not glancing at Angel.

Buffy looked at him. "Do you `really' understand, Giles? I'm the one who let Spike and Drucilla go. Spike I even let go twice! Lord knows how many they've killed since then."

"And how many people have you saved by doing what you did, Buffy? You always do what is necessary. No matter what the personal cost to yourself. I only hope that if I'm ever in that kind of situation that I'll have the courage to do what is right."

She regarded her Watcher. And she was glad to have him back. The tension and concern for Faith was still there, but he was with her completely now. Having no time to worry can help.

Her expression softened. "Sorry, Giles."

"It's seems we're all under a lot of stress right now. But we can concern ourselves with Oranstone at a later time. Right now, we need to find Faith." He directed his gaze to Angel. "And we could use your assistance, Angel."

Angel was unable to tell how Giles felt about asking him for anything, his expression was tightly controlled. "Of course. Just let me grab some clothes."

Buffy watched him disappear then turned to Giles. "We're not going to tell him about the next Slayer being summoned?"

"Well, it really doesn't concern him. And it has no relevance to our situation either. Whether Faith is alive or not, we are going to look for her." He paused for a moment.

"And you're still not sure about Angel," she voiced his thoughts. "But then, giving away Watcher secrets to vampires is probably one of the big `don't do's in your Watcher's Handbook."

"Actually, it is." A little smile was evident on his lips and he shrugged slightly. "But, ever since I've met you, Buffy, it seems as if I've broken almost all the Council's `don't do's."

Buffy lowered her head and looked up at him with her infamous puppy-dog eyes. "They won't take away your pension for that, will they?"

He almost chuckled.

"Giles?" she said, her voice suddenly serious again. "How does the Council know who's going to be the next Slayer?"

"I don't know."

Buffy's eyebrows narrowed in a frown. "You don't?"

"There are a great many secrets the Council must safeguard. Being the Watcher of the current Slayer does grant me access to quite a bit more information than I was privy to before, but that secret is known only to a handful of individuals on the Council itself."

Buffy was about to say something more when Angel returned. He was in his usually black attire of leather pants, boots, and had on a gray long sleeve shirt under his long black coat. He looked hot --ready--to go.

* * * *

Faith couldn't remember when she had lost consciousness, but it must have been right after the demonic Leader introduced her to the Vampire Slayer. Or was that Slayer Vampire? she wondered. But the next thing she knew was that she was waking up in a real dungeon this time, lying on a real stone floor. Her head hurt and her mind was reeling out of control.

How could that be possible? A Slayer who was a vampire. Faith knew that when it came to the studies, she was not the first to ask which page to turn to, nor would she even . . . care. But her previous Watcher never said anything about Slayers becoming vampires, nor had

Giles in the few short months he had been her Watcher. Nothing like this must have ever happened before, she figured. If it had, one of them would have brought the subject up already. Buffy definitely would've known also.

Big deal, she told herself. It's happening, girl, just deal with it and concentrate on getting your ass out of this dump, so you can start killing these creatures.

But there was something else. Something she was trying to keep out of her thoughts. Faith even clutched her hands to her head as they invaded her mind and her brain started to process them.

If this new vampire was really a Slayer; which she already knew was the truth; then that meant a Slayer must've died. A new Slayer was called only when the previous Slayer died. That had been one of the first things that was taught to her even before she herself was called. When Buffy died, briefly, that Slayer, Kendra, was called. But that chick hardly lasted a year when the vamps claimed her ass, thus, activating Faith.

So, she thought. Either Buffy died. . .again, or she herself must have.....

"No!" she screamed through clenched teeth. Still clutching her head, she pushed off with her legs and slammed her back into the rocky wall she'd been sitting against, and felt the sting of pain in her shoulder blades and spine. But her brain was still working against her, trying to figure everything out logically.

"NO!" she screamed, and swung around fast and took a chunk out of the wall behind her with her fist. The pain in her hand succeeded in distracting her brain from its train of thought and she slid back down to the cold floor.

And for the first time, she noticed she was barefoot. Of course, she was still wearing the same clothes she'd had on when she returned to her motel room from her patrol. The tight black pants and maroon long-sleeve midriff. She had taken off her boots before hopping onto the bed, planning on watching the snowy programs on the TV. But she had barely gotten comfortable when her door had burst opened and these special forces looking creeps attacked her.

That was the last thing she remembered before waking up in these caves.

Breathing heavily, the sudden surge of adrenaline quickly fading, the pain in her hand really flared and she examined it. Her knuckles were badly scraped and bleeding but, flexing her hand, she found nothing was broken. With her strength finally returning to her she could now focus on trying to get the hell out of here.

She rose to her feet and walked to the wooden door with a small barred window. It looked thick and very sturdy. Not stopping when she reached it, she kicked with all her might and the heavy door trembled but did not give. She took a couple of steps back to do it again.

"What are you doing in there?" growled a voice from the window.

"How cool, a visitor," she said, and kicked the door again. The door continued to hold, but it seemed to weaken.

"Stop that!" commanded the voice.

"I'd very much like to see you make me!" she shouted back.

She was about to kick once more when she saw another head appear in the window and she heard those less than human voices start to converse with each other.

She was about to kick the door again when she decided to change her tactics. She made a show of wavering on her feet, putting a hand to her forehead, as if she were dizzy. As she swayed, she saw the two faces watching her and Faith collapsed to the ground in a sitting position, but made it look as if she was having a hard time staying in that position. Then she heard what she wanted to hear.

Her cell door opened with a groan on its tortured hinges and the two creeps walked in carrying chained manacles. Faith watched them from the corner of her eye, still playing the weak prisoner, and it looked like they were falling for it, too.

"Pick her up," said the one with the chains.

The other one reached down and grabbed her arm and started to pull her up roughly. Faith let him lift her so that she was on her knees and threw her other arm up between his legs, slamming his privates with a hard uppercut. Not being human, at least they had the same weaknesses, she thought. And as he bent forward around his pain, Faith rose quickly, planting her knee in his face. She didn't even see him fly off the ground and land on his back, as she used the momentum of the move to spin around and face the second monster.

He was already moving in on her, having pulled a small club from his belt, the chains still hanging from his other hand. The Slayer ducked from side to side as he swung the weapon at her, then captured his wrist as it came at her again in a backhand swing. She smashed the side of his elbow with a forearm, forcing him to release the club, and caught it with her free hand. Faith side-stepped the bastard, spinning on her barefeet, and broke the club off the back of his skull with a resounding crunch.

The goon flopped on his face, never to move again, and a real wave of dizziness swept through Faith.

"Whoa," she said, trying to steady herself, and waited for the world around her to stop spinning.

Before it faded, Faith was already moving for the door. She needed to find her way out of here as soon as possible. Not knowing where she was, where the exit could be, and not even knowing how many bad guys there were, she decided to look on the bright side. And she would as soon as she found it.

Faith knew it had only been just a few minutes since breaking out of her cell, but wandering around these caves seemed to stretch the time into hours. She would have worried that she was lost if she didn't already *not* know where she was going. But every turn she took there

were still torches lit on the walls about every twenty feet, so she figured she was still in the enemy's domain.

The dizziness had completely faded by now, but whatever had been done to her to bring her to this place must have really taken a lot out of her, because she was definitely not one hundred percent yet. Then another sensation swept through her head. But this was a very familiar feeling, one she was born to perceive.

Faith had just reached the next turn and pressed her back against the rough surface, just a few feet away from a torch on the wall. The vampire that rounded the corner had been about Faith's age when she had been turned, but she had to be several years older than the Slayer. This had possibilities, she thought, as she grabbed the vampire by the lapels of her dark jacket and swung her face-first into the wall. Her head impacted on the stone with a smack that would gross out the stoutest Wes Craven fan and Faith moved in as she dropped to her knees.

She grabbed the vampire by her red hair to continue the head trauma against the wall, and the bitch drove her elbow back into Faith just below her belly button, the force of the blow sending the Slayer to the other wall. The vampire sprang to her feet and faced her, blood coursing down her prominent vampiric brow, and snarled, her jagged teeth and fangs flickering in the torch light.

Faith quickly composed herself. "Does the number 3:16 mean anything to you?"

The passage was less than ten feet wide and the vampire would be on her in an instant. As soon as the creature sprang, Faith used whatever speed she could muster so that she leapt almost at the same time and they met in the middle of the space. The Slayer had aimed her lunge lower, catching the vampire in the middle and slammed her back against the wall. They fell in a tumble to the ground and Faith was under the vampire, but it was dazed from the impact and her fangs were closer to Faith's neck than she preferred. Before the creature could recoup, Faith head-butted her in the nose and the vamp flopped off her. That last move sending waves of nausea through her, Faith got to her knees as fast as she could and moved up behind the vampire, who was still struggling to rise. She wrapped her arms around her neck and with a strong twist, filled the corridor with a deathly snap.

The vampire flopped limply to the ground next to her, and Faith let herself slump as well.

"Too, bad," she said, to the vamp but her voice was just a tired whisper, "because I just whipped your ass."

Faith took just a few seconds to catch her breath, reminiscing how she used to be able to take on three vampires like this without breaking a sweat. But even through her fatigue, she still felt the rush that went through her with each kill. Okay, it was a somewhat tiny sense of accomplishment due to her predicament, but at least it lifted her spirits a little.

She pulled the jacket off the vampire and found it fit her just about right. Wouldn't want to let such fine accessories get turned to dust along with the vamp, she thought. It would be such a waste. At least

it would keep the cold away that even the torches couldn't seem to lessen. Next, she took the vampire's high heel boots. But they turned out to be too small for the Slayer.

She threw them away with a curse. "All the vampires in the world I could have killed and I have to snuff one with feet smaller than Buffy's."

She got to her feet and looked at the vampire again. "Thanks for the jacket though. But don't bother getting up, I'll find my own way out."

With that, Faith started for the corner again. Not slowing down, she plucked the torch from the wall and tossed it on top of the vamp and was half way down the next corridor when she heard the combustion behind her.

Faith continued to follow the torches and, luckily, she didn't run into many forks or intersecting corridors; and those she did come across were not lit with torches so she avoided them. She didn't run into any more monsters, and she wasn't sure if that was a good sign. Then she started to get the nagging feeling that she was being followed, but every time she looked behind her there was always nothing there.

After a few more twists and turns, and the sensation not fading, she decided that her escape had finally been discovered. No need for discretion, she started running half speed. When she rounded the next turn she did become aware of something, a lot of somethings, chasing her. She still couldn't see them and picked up a little more speed, tapping into her Slayer strength for help, which was still at less than nominal levels.

Around the next turn the cave became a cavern the size of a tennis court with a high ceiling. And she saw two large ugly looking creeps who must be the guards to the lobby. Behind them, on the far side, was a smaller passage which Faith guessed led to the outside world. All she needed to do was get past these two. One of them was a vampire, she could tell even without her Slayer sense, but the other . . . all she knew was that he was no more human then the other two from her cell.

Faith sighed resignedly, as she looked at them. "Okay. I suppose I can make time for you two. But this better not take long, okay?"

She readied herself in a fighting stance as the inhuman and vampire split to surround her, forcing her to only keep one in sight at a time. Faith could not have that and launched herself at the vampire. She came in with a front kick that the vamp blocked but was already following through with a series of punches to its face and chest, which the vampire also managed to block, to the Slayer's surprise. She found her opening when he retaliated with a kick of his own and Faith stepped in, as she blocked it, kicking his supporting leg out from under him.

She was already turning around, as he dropped, and just barely blocked the punch the inhuman sent at her head. She ducked the swing of his other arm and sent a flurry of punches into his mid-section, topping off with a viscous right hook to the face that sent him

spinning off the ground. She used the momentum of the punch to send a spinning back kick into the vampire's gut, as he came at her, from behind. She grabbed him, as he bent over, and shoved him into the inhuman, just halfway to his feet, sending them both down again.

With the field wide open, Faith booked it triple time, making a dash for the exit. Ten feet from it, two figures stepped through the entrance and her feet skidded on the dirt, as she stopped.

It was the Demon Leader, still wearing the hooded robe; for which Faith was grateful, and the Slayer Vampire. Out of the two, Faith suspected that the vampire was the more powerful, but she knew the Leader could give her one hell of a fight even if she had been at full strength. There was no way she was going to be able to pass them.

But that wasn't going to keep her from trying. Faith took a step forward, readying herself. She looked over her shoulder and saw that the vampire and inhuman were already on their feet and moving towards her. But what caught her eye, was that the inhuman's face was hanging off the side of its cheek revealing its true demonic features. It yank the mask off and pulled the short wig off its fleshless head. Then, behind them, she saw another five assorted creeps and vamps pour into the room.

The Demon Leader tilted its head at her. "Now, child, do you really think you can escape us?"

"Actually," Faith sneered, "I don't care. Suddenly, I'm just wanting to see just how big a mess I can leave in this room." She grinned sardonically at it. "Are you gamed?"

"Very interesting," the leader said. "But no. I do not have time for this."

The Demon Leader raised a hand toward Faith and the Slayer tensed. Then she staggered as a sharp pain pierced her chest. No longer able to breath, she clutched her chest and sank to her knees. With a fright, she realized that her heart had stopped beating. She opened her mouth to gasp but nothing came out, not even a tiny breath. She fell forward and caught herself with her outstretched arm, her other hand still pressed between her breasts. She looked up to see the Leader, hand still raised, and struggled to get back up. But she wavered and fell on her side. Darkness began to creep around the edges of her vision and she could feel the emptiness start to consume her.

Then something thundered through her head and a gasp exploded from her lungs, and she started to cough. Desperately, her lungs inhaled another labored breath and she expelled that with a ravage cough as well. The thunder in her head continued to pound into her, and Faith realized it was the beat of her heart she was hearing.

She tried to move, but her strength was gone again. She couldn't even move her head. Then a pair of legs walked across her sight and a booted foot flopped her onto her back, and she found herself looking up at the Slayer Vampire.

When the girl was human, she had been either Chinese or Japanese and

had probably been very popular with the boys, Faith thought. And there was still a touch of innocence in the face that Faith new had faded from herself a few years ago. Had Buffy looked that innocent when she was called to be the Slayer? she wondered.

Then the Slayer Vampire's face changed as she kneeled down next to her, fangs sprouting as her mouth opened slightly. Her brow furrowed but did not turn into the usual demonic features that took over regular vamps when they vamped out. She grabbed Faith by the hair and raised her upper body, exposing her neck.

Faith could do nothing but glare at the creature, filling as much rage into her face as she could. She swore, silently; because she could not speak, that she was going to kill this creature. Even if it turned her into a vampire, she would somehow kill her.

"No, my child," the Leader said, as the vampire was about to sink her teeth into the Slayer's neck. The creature looked up at the demon and Faith could tell she wasn't going to obey its master. The Slayer Vampire looked down, opened its mouth, and bent towards Faith's neck again.

Before the fangs reached her skin, Faith saw a bright flash flare from the creature's left arm. She dropped the Slayer and shot to her feet, as if she had just been shot. The vampire clutched the arm and looked at it when the light faded. Faith saw that there was a strange tattoo design just below the shoulder. The Slayer Vampire glared at its master.

"Not this one, my child," the Demon Leader spoke in that same mild voice it had. "We still have need of her. Go out, now. There are plenty of other mortals to feed your hunger. But you must avoid the other Slayer at all cost. You need time for your strength to grow."

The creature looked at Faith, then at her master again. Then, with incredible speed; faster than Faith ever could've moved, she ran out of the chamber and disappeared through the passage. That strange tattoo must be some way for the Leader to control her, she thought.

The Slayer was starting to move again, and she was able to move her head to watch what was happening around her. The Demon Leader walked passed her and spoke to its minions.

"Take the Slayer back to her cell. And this time, make sure she will not escape again." The tone of its voice had not changed one octave, but Faith was able to recognize the promise of great punishment in its words.

Its goons obviously believed this too and the inhuman and vampire hurried to lift her from the ground and dragged her away from the chamber, her barefeet scraping uncomfortably against the rough surface. But she hardly noticed, she was too busy trying to force herself to concentrate, find a way to get out of this. When they reached the dungeon, she knew they were going to throw a ton of chains on her and then there would be no chance for her to escape. She could not let that happen.

She raised her head and saw they had already taken several turns

through the passage she had come from. Soon, they would reach the spot where she had killed the vampire, which meant she was half way back to her cell. They were coming toward an intersection in the corridor and Faith noticed something she had not when she had first passed this way. There was a steady roar coming from one of the passages. They had just reached it, when she realized the sound was running water, like a waterfall.

Not taking a moment to consider her actions, she planted her feet against the ground and pushed herself into the inhuman who was holding her left arm. This took her captives by surprise and she slammed the inhuman against the corner leading into that intersecting corridor. The vampire had lost its grip on her and he was moving quickly to grab her again. Faith lashed out with a back kick with as much strength as she could summon, which wasn't much, and when she connected it served to push her and the inhuman away from the vampire who hardly budged from the blow. The inhuman fell back, Faith holding tight to his coat, and they tumbled into the passage, which was an incline, and rolled over each other as they descended into the darkness below.

They reached the bottom, which was even ground again, and Faith rolled away from the goon. Still very weak, and now feeling dizzy, Faith pulled herself unsteadily to her feet. And was punched across the face. She spun around and fell. But instead of hitting the ground again, she continued to fall through open air, and the roar of the running water was suddenly rushing up at her.

End of Part Four

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Five

CHAPTER FIVE

Despite its small size, Sunnydale did support a very productive harbor. The traffic was light but the docks serviced both commercial and private shipping, and at any given time there were always barges, freighters, tugs, and luxury yachts stationed there. Buffy only had the occasion to come down here just a few times, mostly on business, none of them really fond memories. The most prominent being the time she had accompanied Angel down here on her birthday, who was planning to stow away on one of the outbound ships to take away the Judge's severed arm to a far corner of the Earth; in an attempt to keep Spike and Drucilla from assembling the powerful demon.

She had been filled with great sadness at the prospect of Angel being away from her for several months, perhaps half a year, or so, while he found a remote place to bury the demon limb. But they had been ambushed by some of Spike's minions and had lost the piece of the Judge, thus postponing Angel's journey; much to Buffy's relief. Although the assembly of the Judge would have spelled doom for, perhaps, the entire world.

Fate had played its cruel hand, anyway, later that night, after she and Angel escaped from Spike and Dru, as well as the newly assembled clutches of the Judge. They had been tired and wet from the rain when they reached Angel's apartment. Buffy had been in the process of removing her soaked clothes when Angel moved in close to examine a small cut she had suffered on her back.

Buffy could still recall every moment of that night. Everything that had followed. Making love to the only man, the only soul, she had truly loved with all her heart. Thankfully, the dream spared her the events that occurred after that cherished night. Instead of replaying Angel losing his soul, becoming evil and terrorizing her and her friends, she was suddenly walking along a bright sunny beach shore, holding the vampire's hand. She didn't question the impossibility of it all, she just enjoyed it and smiled back at him when he smiled at her.

"Buffy," he said.

"Angel."

"Buffy." She felt someone shake her shoulder lightly. She opened her eyes and looked at Angel. He was behind the wheel of the Citroen; at Giles' suggestion, actually, Buffy reflected. But then, Angel had been around when automobiles had been invented. About the time this car was invented.

"Hey," she smiled at him.

He returned her smile and she saw they were parked just short of the docks.

"Buffy," Giles said behind her. He was holding a stake out to her. She accepted it and hid it inside her jacket. She was now armed with three stakes. Giles was still digging into the large leather bag with the weapons they had raided from the library. He handed her a small, but deadly, silver knife in a sheath, and she stuffed it in the back of her waistband. Next, he handed a couple of stakes to Angel, who accepted with a nod.

"We should split up to cover more ground. It'll be dawn in just over two hours, so we best hurry," Giles said, as they climbed out, shouldering his bag.

"I'll head south, toward the beach," Angel suggested.

"Very well." Giles turned to Buffy. "Buffy, you take to the north and I'll--"

"You'll be with me," she said.

Giles was about to protest, but the stern look he received from his Slayer made him sigh softly. "Very well."

"We'll meet back here in an hour and a half," she said to Angel.

"Be careful."

"You too."

They moved off in opposite directions, the vampire seeming to melt into the darkness.

"Buffy, I don't want to slow you down. You and Angel can move much quickly on your own," Giles said. "Besides, someone should make a sweep of the docks."

"Don't forget, Giles, you're the one that said those creeps at the motel were waiting for you. They wanted to take me alive, but what if they want you dead?" He didn't reply to that. "I just feel a lot better if you're where I can keep an eye on you."

"I'm the one who is supposed to look after you. I am your Watcher, after all."

"And you're doing a great job. I just want you to still be able to do it. So, please, just indulge your Slayer."

"Anything for my Slayer," he said with a small smile.

"We'll take a quick look around the docks when we meet back up with Angel."

Giles seemed satisfied with this and they lapsed into silence as they walked on the elevated ground, with the docks not far below them. Buffy couldn't explain to herself why she was feeling so protective of Giles. Sure, she worried about him and did not want anything to happen to him, but never to the extent where she was afraid to leave him by himself. She figured it was due to Faith's disappearance and that she may very well be dead. But if she was, there was no way Buffy could protect Giles against that kind of pain. Which was why this had become very personal to her.

They continued in silence, the half-moon providing Buffy with enough light to let her night vision search the area without hindrance. Giles, even with the spare pair of glasses he'd retrieved when they had made the stop at the library, could not contribute much more without a flashlight, but he still made the effort.

After a long time, Buffy said, "Giles."

"Hm?"

"Back at the mansion, you said you didn't know how the Council found the next Slayer, but they knew I was going to be a Slayer years before, didn't they?"

"The Council knew you were a candidate to become a Slayer, but until you were actually 'activated' we didn't know for sure."

"A 'candidate?' You mean like running for president?"

"Not necessarily. At any given time there are a handful of candidates around the world with the potential of being chosen as the Slayer."

"Well, what decides it?"

"I would imagine fate?" When Buffy didn't respond to that, he continued. "No one knows why one is chosen, Buffy, just that there must always be a Slayer."

"This is where that 'every generation there is a Chosen One. . . ' comes in, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I guess you have to change that mission statement. I pretty much mucked that up when I died. From now on there's always going to be two Slayers, right?"

"It would appear so."

"Who do you think she is?" she asked.

"The new Slayer?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. It is always imperative to keep a Slayer's, or Slayer candidate's identity secret."

"Do you think she already knows she's the Slayer?"

Giles mulled it over for a second. "If she didn't know before, she will more than likely be informed very soon."

Buffy could tell that the topic of conversation was beginning to make him a little uncomfortable, but she couldn't stop. This was something she needed to hear, needed to get out of the way.

"Why didn't the Watchers contact me before I became the Slayer?"

A small smile appeared on Giles' face. "Can you imagine explaining to your parents why a fourteen year old girl would be gone for hours late at night, and missing a lot of school, or not being seen by your friends."

"That didn't stop you all from calling me just a year later."

"Circumstances had changed. A Slayer was needed."

"Oh," was all Buffy could say. Somewhere back there she had forgotten that another girl had died for her to become the Slayer. She finally said, "Still, I sure could've used the early training."

"Yes. I'm sure it would have been very helpful, but again, yours was a delicate case."

She frowned at him. "Again with my `case.' What's so special about my `case?'"

"Buffy, your `case' is not as uncommon as you may think. The Council can usually locate a Slayer candidate when they are very young. It is, however, very rare when a Watcher is allowed the opportunity to actually start a Slayer's training before she even becomes the Slayer." He saw that she was really listening to him and continued. "Kendra and Faith were unique situations. Faith was --is-- an orphan, and where Kendra was from, family honor provided the opportunity."

"Kendra did say her family gave her to her Watcher when she was young. How young would she have been?"

At first, she thought Giles wasn't going to answer. But then he

cleared his throat and said, "I would imagine she would have been very young."

"So her Watcher would have raised her. Like a daughter?" she asked, but before he could begin to answer, she went on. "No. Not like a daughter. Like a Slayer! You saw how Kendra was! She could give lessons to The Terminator on stoicism. She died with no family and no friends."

Surprised by the anger coming from his Slayer, he said, tentatively, "Buffy, we were her friends."

This did nothing to calm her down, however. "And what did we really know about her, Giles? As her friends shouldn't we have known some of the things normal friends should know? Like what her favorite color was?" In a softer voice, she said, "She had never even kissed a boy."

"She was dedicated to the cause," the Watcher offered.

"But was it her cause? Did she have any more say in the matter than I did? Maybe she didn't fight against her destiny as much because they got to her while she was practically a baby? When she didn't have a normal life to leave behind."

"Buffy, `they' would include me."

She knew she may have just hurt his feelings, but she couldn't stop herself. "And right from the start, you couldn't wait to put the stake in my hand!"

Giles was taken aback by this. "I'm sorry, Buffy. If I came on a little too enthusiastically, it was only because being posted as your Watcher was my first real field assignment. I was somewhat . . . nervous."

This did make her stop. "You? Nervous?"

He nodded. "Yes. Being assigned to a Slayer is a tremendous responsibility. And I was following in the footsteps of the best Watcher of our time."

"Merrick."

"Yes."

Buffy's thoughts drifted to her first Watcher. Without anger, she said, "How many Slayers had he trained?"

"He never--?"

"No. I don't think he wanted to talk about it. But then, we really didn't have much time together. I hardly knew him." She let her gaze drop.

"But you cared about him." Giles made it a statement.

Buffy seemed to double her effort searching for cave entrances. She said, "He died saving my life."

Giles walked by her side, letting the silence settle between them. Then he said, "You were his second Slayer."

Buffy looked at him. "I was only number two for him? And he was considered the 'best?'"

Giles seemed a bit irritated, when he said, "Buffy, Merrick is the only Watcher to be assigned to a second Slayer."

"But he was such --a grandpa man. He wasn't much taller than me! What was he doing out there with monsters?"

"He was doing what needed to be done."

"But as old as he was, you'd think he would have trained more Slayers." She looked at Giles. "Did he train the Slayer before me?"

"No. Merrick was assigned to his first Slayer in 1972. The young lady had just turned 16. He was about my age at the time."

"How did she die?" Buffy quickly shook her head. "No. I don't need to know. But when did she die?"

Giles paused for just a moment. "She was killed in 1982."

Buffy stopped walking and stared at him with a stunned expression. Finally finding her voice, she said, "But the life expectancy of a Slayer--" She trailed off.

"Now you know why he was considered the best," Giles told her.

He started to walk again, and Buffy followed. "If he was so good, why didn't he train the next one?"

"After his Slayer died, he *was* assigned to the next Slayer, but he requested a leave of absence instead. Under the circumstances, he was granted leave of the Watchers."

Buffy considered this for a while. "Did he love her?"

The question didn't seemed to take Giles off guard. "He cared very deeply for her."

"You know what I mean, Giles."

"I couldn't say for sur --" he stopped and looked at her. He said. "Yes. Near the end, I believe he did."

Buffy said, "Do you think she and Merrick were ever . . . together?"

"No. Never," Giles said, with a certainty Buffy rarely heard from him. With prophecies, demons, and monsters, there were never any certainties. "As I said, Merrick was the best."

"Did she know?"

"I suspect she did."

Buffy looked away. The silence stretched once more.

What Giles said next did take her off guard.

"You're angry with him."

Exasperated, she said, "What? Why would I be--?"

"Because he died."

Buffy averted her eyes again. "I couldn't save him. It's my job to protect others."

"And he did what was expected of him. He looked after his Slayer."

"He did his duty," Buffy said softly. "As you said, he was the best."

"Yes, he was. But when he saved you, I don't think he was doing it out of any sense of duty. He just knew he wasn't going to lose another Slayer under his watch."

Silence once more. It occurred to Giles that Buffy had never really mourned the death of her first Watcher. That would definitely explain her behavior toward him of late. Was she really that frightened of losing him as well? he wondered. From past experiences, that he reflected on with shame, he knew, that aside from losing a friend, the prospect of having to fight against the monsters by herself truly terrified her. That business with Ethan Rayne and the Mark of Eyghon over a year ago, had lead Giles to drink and try to hide his past from his Slayer, not only straining their relationship but scaring her by acting so out of character. Then again, a few months later, when he had gone after Angel by himself, for killing Jenny. Angel would have killed him had Buffy not arrived in time. To remind himself of his responsibility, he still replayed the scene, after she had dragged him out of the burning factory, over in his head. He had pushed her away yelling at her that it was not her fight. She, in turn, had laid him out flat with a single punch, and had yelled back at him.

'Are you trying to get yourself killed?' she had shouted. He was on his hands and knees sobbing. Then Buffy had crumbled next to him, shedding her own tears, hugging him. 'You can't leave me! I can't do this alone.'

That moment had sobered him completely, and not from drinking. From that point on, he had vowed that he would never put her through that kind of pain ever again.

And seeing the tears in his Slayer's eyes, he wanted to take that pain away more than anything. "Buffy--"

She shook her head. "We really need to be quiet." She managed to give him a smile to alleviate some of his worry. "Having a '7th Heaven' moment is not the way to sneak up on the bad guys."

Giles nodded and they continued the searched. After a moment, Buffy pointed down the grassy bluff. "Let's try down there." she said, and they made their way to lower ground.

They had almost left the docks behind them and were approaching the north part of the beach. Not long `til sunrise, it seemed there wasn't a soul anywhere in sight, and Giles hoped not, especially with the demons and vampires that were supposed to be close by.

"I think I see something," Buffy said softly. She pointed to the side of the bluff but Giles could not make anything out clearly. He followed her and when they were ten feet away, he saw a jagged opening, about five feet wide, almost perfectly hidden by the shadows. "Now it's time for a flashlight."

"I have something better." Giles searched his bag and pulled out a small oil lantern.

"Watcher credo: always be prepared," she said, with a smile. "Or did you guys steal that from the Boy Scouts?"

Giles smiled and dug a lighter from his tweed jacket when he felt, more than saw, Buffy stiffen. She had an intense look in her eye she got when her Slayer sense went on alert. Despite her casual attitude toward honing such skills, he had come to trust them when she did indeed use them.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Something's close by."

"In there?" He nodded toward the cave.

"No." The Slayer's expression was very serious now. "Above us." Giles saw she was suddenly holding a stake. Following her lead they inched slowly backwards away from the side of the hill, keeping their attention on any attack from above. They had backed away nearly thirty feet and still saw nothing at the top of the bluff.

"I don't see anything," he said.

"Trust me, it's up there."

"A vampire?"

"I don't know. I think so."

"You're not sure?" It wasn't an accusation, or lack of confidence in her, he was just asking for more details. His Slayer didn't disappoint him.

"It feels like a vampire, but then it doesn't. I can't describe it. I've never sensed anything like this before. The vibes I got from Oranstone weren't this strong. But it's very powerful and . . . it knows we're here."

"Then why doesn't it show itself?"

"I'll ask if I get the chance before I stake it."

Then they fell silent when they saw a silhouette step into sight. It was a slender figure, almost five and a half feet tall, and her long hair blew slightly with the light breeze.

"Faith?" Giles whispered. Buffy didn't say anything to contradict what he said, so maybe she was wondering the same thing. But before she could say anything, the figure reached the edge of the bluff and sprung into the air.

At first, it looked as if she were flying as her trajectory took her high over them, but then she came down quickly and her feet sank into the sand when she landed. She turned to face them as she stood up straight.

"Not Faith," Buffy said and stepped in front of her Watcher.

"Buffy," he said, but was suddenly aware there wasn't anything he could advise her on. "Be careful."

She grinned over her shoulder at him. "It'll take just a minute."

"I hope so," he said, as she closed the distance between herself and the creature.

Buffy was close enough to see the creature clearly, in the light of the half moon. She looked about a year or two younger, but to demons and vampires age was a relative term. Buffy prepared herself for attack at any moment, but the creature still made no move against her. Okay, she thought, this could get really serious. She hadn't know many vampires who would waste time sizing up their opponent. Spike hadn't attacked her the first time they had met, just gave her a death threat after he had watched her take down another vampire. Angel had been even worse, when his soul had been taken away, thriving on the psychological torment he caused her.

"This is usually the time where one of us would start making witty banter," she said. "And since it doesn't seem like you're the talkative type I guess it's going to have to be me."

"I know you," the creature said. God, she even sounded younger than me, Buffy thought.

"You do?"

"Yes. You're the other Slayer."

Buffy's blood chilled. "What have-- Where's Faith?"

The creature just smiled at the Slayer. "The Master wanted me to avoid you. Said I wasn't strong enough to face you yet. But I wasn't allowed to feed on the other Slayer, and Slayer blood is just so sweet. I can't leave without at least a taste."

"I think you should try to take it," Buffy hissed at her, stake ready.

The vampire glanced at the weapon. "Ah, the weapon of choice for any fine Slayer." The vampire took a small step forward just to put her body at an angle toward Buffy, offering a smaller target.

This vamp has had some training, she thought. Then something else

occurred to her. "If you weren't allowed to feed on the Slayer, how would you know what Slayer blood taste like?"

"Because I've had a sip." The vampire raised a fist close to its face. Then, eyes locked on Buffy, opened her mouth to reveal elegantly long fangs and sank them into her wrist.

Buffy could only stand there, stake held up, in shock. Behind her, she thought she heard Giles gasp, but she wasn't sure.

The vamp pulled its wrist away, fangs tinted red, and smiled at the Slayer's expression. "Of course, my blood isn't as pure as yours any more."

Buffy suddenly felt nauseous and her mind reeled with the reality of the situation. But then she forced those distracting thoughts away. She could deal with that later, right now, her more immediate concern was slaying this creature.

Buffy reinforced her fighting stance but the vamp just stood there, body angled, looking at her from under narrowed eyebrows. Still very human looking eyebrows. Whatever part of this creature was Slayer did not give her a demon's appearance when she vamped out, she thought.

Something sliced through the air just to Buffy's left and the vampire's hand shot up and she was suddenly holding a crossbow bolt in her closed fist, just poised inches away from her heart. Buffy looked over her shoulder and saw Giles holding a crossbow, momentarily shocked at what he just saw, then recovered and began to reload. The vampire growled, the first real vamp noise she heard from it, then cocked the bolt back to throw it at her Watcher.

"No!" Buffy screamed. She was too far away to reach her in time, so she hurled the stake at the vamp. It was a clumsy throw but her aim was true, and the blunt end of the stake connected with the side of the creature's head as she released the arrow.

Giles grunted and she heard him hit the ground. She turned to see him on his backside and looking at the tear in the arm of his tweed sleeve, but he was all right. Buffy breathed in relief, then spun around to face her enemy again.

Who was charging her with incredible speed. No time to dodge, Buffy took the charge head on and smoothly flipped the vamp over her hip and, with the help of her Slayer strength, sent her several feet through the air where she landed in a tumble. However, the vampire used the tumble to spring back to her feet.

The vampire smiled at her again, flashing her fangs. It wigged Buffy to see a vamp with just fangs, like all the vampires in the movies with their fake teeth, but somehow, in real life, it was just a little scarier.

Buffy pulled out her second stake from the sleeve of her jacket as the creature approached again.

"Let's see just how well your Watcher trained you," it sneered.

"Gladly," Buffy replied, and launched her attack.

She came in with lightning round kicks, the first one aimed at the vamp's midsection, then she brought the leg up to its face. It blocked them both, to Buffy's irritation, with ease. She followed through with a stake strike. The vampire diverted the attack with a wave of its forearm, side-stepping, and slammed a spinning elbow into Buffy's back. The Slayer fell forward, but she tucked and rolled, putting distance between her and her opponent. Quickly, she was on her feet, and rotated her shoulders against the pain she was feeling between her shoulder blades. The vampire was walking calmly towards her again and Buffy prepared herself, stake ready.

"Let's do that again, shall we?" it hissed.

"Please," Buffy sneered back.

Buffy braced herself to take the offensive again, but suddenly threw her stake straight up in the air. The vampire was distracted, but only slightly, as it managed to block the barrage of punches Buffy unleashed. It retaliated with a punch at the Slayer's head, which she ducked and finally snuck a backhand fist across the vamp's face. It hardly staggered the creature, but Buffy used that moment to grab it by the shoulders and slam her knee as hard as she could into its middle. As the creature bent forward, Buffy snatched the falling stake from the air and shoved it into the vampire's back.

The vampire roared in pain and reeled back with a backhand that connected with Buffy's face. The next thing she knew was that the world was spinning around her and, a moment later, the ground came up to hit her.

"Buffy," she thought she heard someone calling her. Damn, she thought, she had just gone to sleep. It couldn't be time to wake up already. She opened her eyes, at least, they felt like they were open, but she still couldn't see anything. And there was blood in her mouth. With disgust, she spat it out but there was more. Her jaw and the side of her mouth ached.

"Buffy, get up!" she heard Giles say. He sounded right next to her.

She tried to pull herself to a sitting position and felt Giles help her. "Relax, Giles. I'm all right. Just a bit oogy. That was some parting shot she had."

"I'm afraid it wasn't as parting as we would've hoped."

She tried opening her eyes again and her vision slowly returned. "What are you talking about? She's dust. That stake was right through her heart. Actually, I think that was Mr. Pointy. Oh, God, I hope it didn't turn to dust with her, that was Kendra's favorite stake."

"You needn't worry about, uh, Mr. Pointy. He seems to be fine."

Buffy frown and looked up at him and saw he was looking off toward the beach. She turned her head and saw the vampire, still roaring in pain, on its hands and knees, reaching for the stake protruding from

her back.

"Oh, bite me!" she cursed. "Giles, why isn't she turning into dust?"

He tilted his head, narrowed his eyebrows, pursed his lips, took a deep breath, then said, "I don't know."

"And I'm wondering why the Watchers never give you a raise." Under different circumstances she was sure Giles would have given her that British glare he had when he was miffed. "Help me up."

Buffy got to her feet and Giles had to hold her steady when her knees started to buckle. She shook her head, trying to clear it, then spat more blood onto the sand.

"Buffy, we have to get out of here."

"We wouldn't get far. She's fast. Much faster than me."

"Then you have to--"

She grabbed his jacket, angrily. "No! Don't you even say it! I am not leaving you here, so shut up!"

But Giles met her glare. "You can't kill it. I can try to hold it while you make a run for the car."

"No. The plan is: you run for it while I hold it off. We both know I'll last longer. You find Angel. He's fast. I promise, I'll still be alive when he gets here."

Giles looked like he wanted to argue. Another inhuman roar made them look at the vampire again. She had managed to grab Mr. Pointy and, with a spout of blood, pulled the stake out. She tossed the piece of wood away and looked at her prey.

"Dammit, Giles, you know I'm right. Now go!"

Giles looked into her eyes for a moment. Then stepped away. "You just remember your promise."

Buffy gave him a smile. "Don't worry, I will." She reached behind, under her jacket, and pulled out the silver knife. "I'm curious to see how well she'll do without a head."

With one last look at his Slayer, conflict reflected in his eyes, he finally turned and started to run as fast as Buffy had ever seen him run before. She breathed a little easier. No matter whether Angel got here in time or not, at least, she knew Giles would be safe.

She turned to the vampire again and saw it was standing. She was watching Giles disappear over the bluff. She looked at Buffy. "Don't worry. I'll catch up with him soon enough."

"Over my dead body!" Buffy snapped.

The vamp smiled at her. "I'm glad we both agree."

End of Part Five

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Six

CHAPTER SIX

It had been over an hour and Angel still hadn't found anything. He'd only come across two small cave entrances but detected no scent of vampire nor demon inside, so had proceeded on. He would explore those caves further on his way back, which he would have to do very soon now. It was about an hour till dawn and the beach was the least ideal place for a vampire to be caught when the sun rose.

He honestly wished he could say he was searching for the missing Slayer for Faith's sake, but he knew that he was out here because of Buffy. As well, as for Giles. He owed them both more than anyone, who was still living that is. Even though he hadn't actually been there when Angelus had done all those heinous acts, with his soul the dominant presence in his body again, he retained all the demon's memories as if he had done them himself.

The joy he experienced when he --no, when Angelus-- had snapped Jenny Calendar's neck. The pleasures he felt as he tormented Buffy for all those months. Until she had been forced to send him to hell. It had been right after his soul had been returned to him and, for those few moments, he had no recollection of his actions as Angelus. And when Buffy had ran him through with the sword Angel had felt betrayed. Then Acathla's vortex had claimed him, sending him to hell, where he had centuries; in that timeless dimension, to remember everything that had been done in his soul's absence. Then, he could not lay blame on Buffy for doing what she had to do.

Thankfully, however, he hadn't spent his whole time there reliving those horrors, for to survive the torture being reaped upon him, he had to retreat within himself once more. Unfortunately, he couldn't recall his demon to experience the torment in his place.

But before eternity, for some reason, he was expelled from the demon dimension and had spent the next few days wandering the night as another ravenous animal in the woods of Sunnydale. But his own memories of being in the real world had not begun until his consciousness had resurfaced to find himself in some kind of supply room in Sunnydale High, where he had just killed a monster; which had been a student; that had been trying to kill Buffy. At that time, he had forgotten everything once more, and the first thing he did remember was Buffy.

The next few weeks, as he recovered himself, Buffy had taken care of him, helping him regain his strength. During that time he had the occasion to meet the new Slayer, after Kendra's death, so he being a vampire had automatically got them started on the wrong foot. That foot being Faith trying to kill him. Even at full strength Kendra had thrashed him about pretty thoroughly, so he had hardly been a match for the new Slayer in his weakened condition. Luckily, Buffy, with her usual sense of timing working for her, came in with the last second save.

Since then, he and Faith had crossed paths a few times, though under more peaceful conditions, usually during those late night patrols. They rarely spoke to each other and what little that was spoken was colored by a few choice words from Faith. Basically, a "don't bother

me and I won't bother you" treaty.

Had he known about Faith's abduction before Buffy and Giles, his first action would have been to inform them about it. And if he couldn't find them, Angel would have started to search for the Slayer himself. Not because he actually cared much for Faith; though he didn't dislike her, but because it would have been the right thing to do.

A scream cut through the night, as well as Angel's thoughts, and he ran in the direction it came from just before it was cut short. From the sound he knew someone had just died.

When he reached the spot, he saw three vampires feeding on a fisherman. Poor guy, he thought, trying to make a first catch before morning and got more than he bargained for. The vamps looked up from their meal at his approach.

They must have figured him for a vampire for one of them said, "Move along, pal. This one's ours." The others growled in agreement.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," Angel replied as he slid into his own 'game' face. "But I'm afraid I must insist."

The trio dropped their food and formed a rank to face him. "Is it really worth going up against us for just a few drops left?"

"Hey, I'm not a finicky eater. I take what I can get." He noticed that they dressed similar to each other, dark clothes, black jackets, and they definitely were not local. "Besides, I really do hate it when outsiders trespass on my feeding grounds."

"Are you some kind of honcho in these parts?" vamp number two asked.

"Let's just say I'm known in this town."

"Well, if we're going to do this we better get started," said vamp one.

"I agree," Angel said. "You can almost smell the sunrise, now."

They started to form a circle around him. Angel stood his ground and focused more on the sounds they made while they moved, then try to keep them in sight.

Just before they were about to attack, he said, "Where's the Slayer?"

This stopped them for a moment. "What?" vamp one asked.

"C'mon, guys, we're all vamps here. When the Slayer disappears you think the local demon populace wouldn't notice?"

"What's it to you?" This from vamp two, behind him. "I'd figure you'd be happy to be rid of the Slayer?"

"Happiness has nothing to do with it. The Slayer is ours to deal with, we don't appreciate outsiders invading our territory and trying

to show us up."

Vamp one laughed. "'We' who? You look alone to me, friend."

Vamp three spoke up for the first time. "Wait. I know who this is. He's the Traitor. The Slayer is his friend."

"So, this is the infamous Angelus, huh?" vamp one chuckled. "The Master will reward us for bringing your fangs as trophies."

Angel smiled, flashing said fangs. "Then come and get `em, boys."

* * * *

Buffy came down hard on her back, the wind getting knocked out of her, but she didn't lose her knife. The vamp was closing in on her and she kicked herself to her feet to meet its attack. She blocked a fast round kick, followed by a spinning heel-kick, and hopped over a spinning leg sweep. As soon as her feet hit the sand, she was lunging forward with the knife aiming for the vamp's neck. The creature parried the knife hand and blocked Buffy's front kick to its midsection. Then the Slayer was on the defensive again.

Buffy had lost track of how much time had already past. Not more than a few minutes, she was sure, but for the moment it seemed they were evenly matched. Which was untrue, for every hit she had scored on the vamp, the creature had replied three-fold, and Buffy could feel herself slowing down.

Then a side kick got through her defenses and slammed into her stomach, lifting her feet off the ground. The vamp followed through with a left hook that spun Buffy in place. Buffy used the spin to lash out with the knife, but the vampire captured her wrist, twisted her arm, forcing her to bend forward, and knelt her in the face. It snatched the knife away from her, tossing it to the sand, and pushed her away to deliver a jumping spin kick to Buffy's face. The Slayer almost lost the ground again as she spun around a couple of times before dropping to the sand.

Pushing herself up, Buffy saw a steady flow of blood dripping from her mouth to the sand between her hands. But she didn't get the chance to recuperate. A strong hand grabbed her leather jacket at her shoulder and started to yank her back up. As she was pulled to her feet, Buffy wrapped her arm around the vamp's, trapping its elbow, and drove her other fist into the creature's sternum. Then twice more. The Slayer took satisfaction out of hearing it grunt with the pain the blows were causing, and slammed the heel of her palm into its face. Buffy was going to hit her again when the side of a boot came up to her face and disengaged her from her opponent. Both combatants fell to the sand away from each other.

Buffy was on her hands and knees again and saw the vamp just a few feet away. It was dazed but it was recovering faster than she was. She needed to move. If she was still on the ground when it got to its feet, she was done for.

And she was still on one knee when the vamp came for her again. Buffy slipped her hand inside her jacket and used her other arm to block the round kick it launched at her. Her hand came out with her last stake and she plunged it into the vamp's thigh. The creature screamed

in pain and fell to her knees in front of the Slayer.

Buffy smiled at her. "Hi." Then unleashed a vicious uppercut that almost lifted the vamp off the ground as it flew back, the momentum of the swing making Buffy fall as well.

Like a wounded animal, the vampire scrambled back to its knees and clutched the stake sticking out of its thigh. If she had been able to, Buffy would have taken advantage of the situation. As it was, she could only struggle to catch her breath and her arms were trembling as she pushed herself off the sand. She watched the vampire pull the stake from its leg with another scream. It looked at the wooden weapon then glared at her.

"Damn cheater."

"Ueber-cheater," Buffy replied. "It certainly sucks to be you, doesn't it?"

"Not anymore," it said, on its feet again. It kicked sand in Buffy's eyes.

The Slayer tried frantically to wipe the sand from her eyes. "Son of a--"

A hard kick to the face stopped her and she rolled back, flopping flat on her stomach. Blinded, she began to push herself up again. She was grabbed from behind and jerked to her feet. She swung blindly in that direction and hit nothing, the momentum causing her to stagger. She swung with the other arm and continued the beating against the innocent air around her. She maintained a labored fighting stance and closed her mouth to silence her loud breathing. She could do this, she told herself. She was blind, and in a fight to the death with a creature stronger and faster than she was. She'd faced worse odds. Although, she was unable to recall them just now. Suddenly, she was wishing she had taken Giles' sessions of training her to fight blindfolded more seriously, but no, she had to showoff like she usually did to end training she didn't want to do early.

Well, now's the time to prove I wasn't just showing off, she thought. Put my allowance where my mouth is. She concentrated on the sounds around her. Not far away she detected the surf flowing gently on the beach, the breeze swaying the brush a little farther inland, and soft footfalls on sand behind her left shoulder.

Aiming her kick head-level to the sound, Buffy spun 360 degrees as fast as she could and felt the heel of her foot connect solidly against, what she hoped was, the side of the vampire's head. As she staggered from the spin, she heard the creature's grunt of pain and something hitting the ground hard, and quickly rubbed the sand from her eyes. Blinking, her sight returning, she saw the vamp starting to scramble to its knees. She scanned the area around her for any of her weapons and saw one of her stakes several yards to her right. She made a dash for it and her legs wobbled slightly under her. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the vampire jumping to its feet and charging after her. It would be on her in a second. At the last instant, Buffy dove for the stake, hitting the sand in a rolling tumble, snatching up the weapon, and had it ready when she bobbed back to her feet.

The vampire came at her wielding the stake Buffy had stuck in its thigh, and the Slayer parried the strike with her free forearm, then retaliated with her own stake. But the vampire was suddenly standing somewhere else, moving faster than her eyes were able to keep up. Or she was just slowing down to the point she was losing sense of her surroundings. Buffy quickly reversed her stake in a backhand swing at the creature's head but it was blocked and she felt something slash her ribs under that arm. Tucking her arm against the pain, she tried to back-pedal away but could not escape the front kick to the face that snapped her head back. At that time her legs finally decided that they had had enough, and, after taking a couple of shaky steps back, her knees buckled and Buffy landed on her rear. She sat there for a dazed moment before her eyes rolled up and she slumped back on the sand.

* * * *

Giles' lungs were on fire by the time he made it back to the car and he knew he would not be able to go much farther without slowing down. His adrenaline and desperate need to save Buffy was all that had kept him going, but his body would soon start to fail him. He had never been in prime physical condition, even though he hadn't exactly been a slouch when he was younger, but he was feeling his age catching up to him. So as soon as he was back to the Citroen, he dove behind the wheel, tossing the weapon bag in the passenger seat, and burned as much rubber as the old vehicle allowed him to.

Speeding south on the elevated road looking down over the beach he had a clear view all the way to the water, but he hoped Angel was not exploring a cave now or he would drive past him. But after a few minutes he did see several figures out on the sand in a flurry of motion. Pulling to the side, he jumped out and saw that it was a battle and Angel was in the middle of it, dealing with three opponents.

Having retrieved his bag, Giles started his way down to the beach to help the vampire anyway he could. He knew, first hand, that Angel was as skilled a fighter as Buffy in many ways and was perfectly capable of handling most situations. And, indeed, as he drew nearer, it appeared he was holding his own against; Giles realized, other vampires. Angel did have a stake in his hand, but every time he found an opening on one of his foes, one of the other two would pull his focus away, but he would eventually prevail. Only problem was, it was taking too long.

Giles drew as close as he could without drawing the attention of any of the vampires, but it looked as if they were completely absorbed in their battle with Angel. He set the bag down and pulled his crossbow out again.

Vamp one was charging Angel from behind, while he was delivering a side kick to vamp three in front of him, but Angel was aware of this and had a backhand fist waiting for him. The power of the blow sent vamp one's feet out from under him and he flipped over as he flew under Angel's arm, landing hard on his chest. Angel took a chance to try to finish the down vampire with the stake, but was grabbed from behind by vamp two, pinning his arms back. Angel struggled against the hold and vamp three was coming at him again. He lashed out with a high kick to the creature's face, staggering it, then slammed his head back against vamp two's nose, and the hold lessened. Angel sent

another kick into vamp three's face, sending him to the sand, then freed himself and smashed a hard elbow into vamp two's already shattered nose. He brought the stake up, poised to plunge it into the vampire's heart, but vamp one was up again and would have stopped him had Giles not sent a crossbow bolt through its heart from behind. Vamp one turned to ashes just as Angel staked vamp two's heart.

Angel spun around and saw Giles standing there, already reloading the crossbow. Their eyes met, then they turned their attention to the remaining vampire who was getting to his feet. Finding himself suddenly alone and out numbered, the vampire quickly came to the wise decision to make like a vamp out of hell, and did his best to disappear into the night.

Before Angel could say anything, Giles shouted, "Angel, hurry! Buffy's in trouble and she needs your help!"

Angel did not waste time saying anything and they ran back to the car.

* * * *

Faith felt the rush of water against her face and opened her eyes to a world dark and out of focus behind a watery blur. Blinking her vision clear, she raised her head, and threw herself onto her side as she coughed up sea water. A great deal of sea water. She was still heaving well after all the water was expelled from her lungs. She tried to take a deep breath but started to cough again, her tortured lungs a sharp pain against her chest.

She concentrated on breathing for a few moments and took in her surroundings. She was outside. The bright half-moon and stars confirmed this and she was laying on a beach as the surf flowed around her. Not very far in the distance to her right she saw the docks of Sunnydale.

Whatever had happened to her, Faith figured, she must have fell into some sort of underground river that dumped her out in the sea where she washed up on shore. Good thing the river was heading out and not down to the center of the Earth. Faith would bet money no other Slayer had died that way, but all things considered, she was glad she didn't turn out to be the first. Still, she was surprised she hadn't drowned during the escape. Especially with all the water that had been in her lungs. Chalk up another one for Slayer resiliency.

Gathering what strength she knew she did not have, she pushed herself up and managed to sit up on her knees. She was still wearing her confiscated jacket, but it weighed a ton soaked so she pulled it off. She let it drop behind her and the tide grabbed it and it slipped away. Next, she pulled her hair out of her face, slicking it back for the moment. She began to shiver.

First, she needed to get the hell away from here, then she could worry about catching pneumonia. With any luck, maybe the undead squad thought she had died, but she wasn't about to rely on being that lucky. Her legs felt dead but they supported her weight without buckling. Good girl, she thought. Now to try walking. One step. Two step. After the third step, Faith tried taking two, one right after

the other. Since she didn't fall, she picked up the pace just a bit without pausing and headed inland angling toward the docks. She needed to call Giles to pick her up, and bring her a couple hundred blankets.

That was when she became aware of the noise coming from up ahead. She could not mistake it for anything else than a fight. A nasty one by the sound of it. There was a small sand dune in front of her, so she wasn't able to see it, but the sounds grew louder as she approached on unsteady legs. Then she heard an inhuman roar of, what sounded like, pain. Someone had just gotten seriously hurt, and it wasn't a human, and unless the monster was fighting another monster, there was only one person who could have inflicted that much pain on such a creature.

"Buffy," she tried to say, but her voice was severely hoarse.

Recognition suddenly hit Faith, with dread, as she realized she knew the sound of that roar. It belonged to the Slayer Vampire. And if Buffy was fighting it. . .

She forced herself to go faster but her legs were just not moving as fast as she wanted them to, and she was almost over the dune. When she crested the rise the battle came into sight, and what she saw chilled her worse than the cold air.

Even from this distance, she could tell her fellow Slayer was in bad shape, just by the way she was moving. She was staggering but still determined to keep fighting. Buffy could never be accused of not having guts, but right now she was in danger of losing them. The Slayer Vampire blocked a stake strike aimed at its head and used its own stake to slash Buffy in the side. The young Slayer cried out in pain, trying to back off, but the vampire snapped a front kick to her face, and Buffy took two wobbly steps back before dropping to the sand.

Faith almost stumbled and fell, but kept her feet under her and actually got them to move a little faster, thanks to a sudden adrenaline surge. But she was still too far away. She could only watch as the creature knelt down next to Buffy and lifted her head by the back of her hair. She turned the Slayer's head to the side, exposing her jugular, and opened its mouth revealing its cruel fangs.

"Buffy!" Faith tried to shout, but it was still weak. "Buffy!" she tried again. This time; thanks to her ragged throat, it came out almost as a growl and the vampire noticed her for the first time.

Its head turned to Faith, it didn't notice Buffy's eyes open and the Slayer swung her arm up at the creature. She was still holding her stake, but in her weakened condition, managed to drive just an inch of the tip into the vamp's throat. The monster reeled back in pain, but not without smashing a hard fist into Buffy's face and she flopped limply to the sand again.

"Buffy!" Faith shouted with more urgency.

Clutching its neck, blood coursing over its hands, the Slayer Vampire

got to its feet and backed away from the prone Slayer and glared at the second Slayer charging her. Faith wondered if it had known how weak she really was would it have stuck around. But the Slayer accepted, without complaint, the choice the creature made to retreat and it was already out of sight by the time Faith reached Buffy's body.

She dropped weakly beside the teenager and put a hand to her chin. "Buffy! Buffy! Wake up!" She didn't get any response. There was a lot of blood on her face. She pulled her into her lap. "C'mon, B! Don't do this! C'mon, girlfriend, show me a sign here. You don't want to die again, all right? It's so overrated!"

Faith felt tears burning her eyes. She shut her eyes against them. "Dammit, bitch! Don't you dare die on me! You die, I swear to God I'll kill myself just so I can kick your ass all over Slayer Heaven!"

Faith felt a shudder go through Buffy and her eyes opened slightly. Her green eyes looked at her for a few seconds before coming into focus. "Faith," she said, weakly. "If you're here, I must be dead."

Blinking away unshed tears, Faith smiled down at her. "No, girlfriend. I'm not dead yet. Would they let me into heaven looking like this?" Her long brown hair, made stringy by the salt water, was in her face again.

Buffy tried to nod in agreement. "Yeah, you do look like shi. . ."

Faith chuckled. "Trust me, B, you look even worse." Buffy managed a small smile. "C'mon, we got to get you out of here before she decides that she's hungry enough to try again. And I'm in no shape to go even an exhibition round with that toothy bitch."

"You know what that was then?" Buffy asked as Faith lifted her to her feet.

"That, girlfriend, was a Slayer Vampire." Faith wrapped an arm around her waist as she draped Buffy's arm across her shoulders.

"A Slayer Vampire?"

"I know it sounds freaky, but that's what it is. We met earlier tonight, if this still is the same night."

"But how?"

"I'm not sure. There was this demon guy, gave new meaning to the word 'plastic surgery.' He --it-- is some kind of master. It has some sort of control over this creature. My guess, this girl was supposed to be the next Slayer, but these creeps got to her and turned her into a vampire. And this demon leader must have done something to me to make it seem like I was dead." Faith did not tell her about the great Darkness she had felt after waking in the caves for the first time. It didn't matter, she told herself, my death was somehow faked, how else could I still be alive? They hadn't wanted me dead, why else would the Demon Leader stop the Slayer Vampire from killing me for real?

"How could it fake your death?" asked Buffy.

Faith recapped her escape attempt, in the caves. How she had run into the Demon Leader and the Slayer Vampire, and how the demon was able to stop her heart from beating. It made sense; Faith was even starting to believe it, that if this creature could stop her heart for a long period, it could somehow fool nature into thinking she had died and activate the next Slayer.

Even in her current condition, Buffy seemed to accept this.

"Are you going to be okay, B?" she asked, changing the subject.

With her free arm, Buffy was holding the side of her ribs that had been slashed. She was in obvious pain, but she nodded. "I don't think any permanent damage was done. Slayer healing: cure for everything."

"Let's hope so. That was a pretty cool move with that stake."

Buffy looked at the hand that was clutching her ribs and saw she was still holding her stake. "Mr. Pointy!"

Faith frowned. "Who?"

"This is Mr. Pointy." Buffy was smiling. "I'm getting this little guy bronzed."

Thinking that Buffy may be suffering from a concussion, she said, "Oookay. But, you know Giles is going to flip when he sees you. What are you doing down here, anyway?"

"Oh, the Watcher's Council had called Giles, last night, and told him about the next Slayer being called. We thought you were dead. We checked your room and saw that someone had been in there."

"Yeah, I was jumped buy these gung-ho types. I don't remember exactly what happened."

"The Order of Taraka. Demon bounty hunters and assassins. Although, some of them are human. We figured that was how they were able to get in your room before you knew they were there. Me and the gang had to deal with them last year. Real nasty guys."

"I'll say."

"Anyway," Buffy went on. "We got a lead that there was a lot of paranormal activity down here."

"So you wanted to recover my body?" Faith asked.

"We wanted to find *you.* You think I was about to take the Council's word for it that you were dead?"

Faith tried to shrug. "Well, they were right about the next Slayer being called."

"But how did the demon do it without killing you?"

"Like I said, he must have somehow faked my death. They didn't want me to stay dead, or I'm thinking they would have just slit my throat."

"This is definitely something we need to talk about with --Giles!" They saw a car screeching to a halt up on the road.

* *

"Why didn't you tell me about the new Slayer being called?" Angel asked.

Giles had quickly relayed everything he had left out at the mansion. "I did not think that Faith's abduction would be connected to the activation of the next Slayer. Least of all, that new Slayer being here in Sunnydale."

"So, whoever is behind the Taraka contract needed Faith--"

"Or Buffy," Giles added.

--or Buffy, to activate this Slayer they could turn into a vampire." He looked at Giles. "How would they know this girl would be the next Slayer?"

"That is a question I myself would be very interested in finding out the answer to."

"And it can't be killed?"

"Buffy had already staked its heart." Giles tried to keep the worry from his voice, but was not succeeding. "But she is very resourceful. I'm sure she'll find a way to keep it at bay until we get there."

"Giles, stop the car!" Angel shouted.

"What?!" the Watcher exclaimed, but brought the car to a halt.

"That's Buffy!" Angel pointed toward the beach below. He turned and saw two small figures walking together. It looked as if one was half carrying the other.

"It must be taking Buffy to its lair." Giles grabbed up his crossbow and he and Angel jumped out of the car. The vampire flew down the bluff and he was hard pressed to keep up. Angel slowed as they came nearer. Giles stopped next to him and brought the crossbow up to bear at the figure supporting his Slayer.

"No, Giles," Angel said, putting a hand on the weapon, diverting his aim.

Giles focused his gaze as they got closer. He started to make out Buffy's condition. "Buffy!" he exclaimed. Then he realized who was helping her. "Faith! Thank God!"

He dropped the crossbow and was running to his Slayers. "My God!" he said, as he saw Buffy, taking her other arm. He looked at Faith.

"Faith, what happened?"

The brunette Slayer said, "She got the crap beat out of her."

"Oh, yes. But I meant, what happened to you?"

Buffy spoke up, voice still weak. "Oh, that's a long story, Giles."

"I died," Faith said.

"Apparently not that long," Buffy said, wishing everyone would stop giving one-sentence summaries.

"We can debrief later," Faith said, glancing at Angel, who was hovering close to Buffy, but kept his distance from the other Slayer. Smart for a vampire, she thought. "Right now, we gotta book before she comes back with some of her friends."

Giles regarded his younger Slayer, with a sense of pride. She may not be aware, he thought, but Faith was acting a lot like Buffy just now. Taking charge. Now if only she continues like this. . . But Giles had to focus on what's at hand. "Quite right. Angel?"

Giles eased Buffy from Faith, seeing how she wasn't looking all too well herself, and the vampire easily took Buffy into his arms. Giles took Faith's arm and draped it across his shoulder.

"I'm all right, G," she protested. "I can make it on my own."

"Of course," he said. "Then perhaps you wouldn't mind helping me back to the car? I, uh, seemed to have, uh, twisted my ankle a bit on the way down here. Yes."

He thought he saw a faint smile on her face. "Sure. You're the Watcher. Whatever you think's best." With that, she leaned into him a little more, letting him take most of her weight off her feet.

End of Part Six

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Seven

CHAPTER SEVEN

Despite his concern for Buffy, Angel could not help the feeling of great relief when Giles finally pulled into the parking lot of Sunnydale High. The glow of the sun just below the horizon had not yet peeked out, but the vampire could smell it was just minutes away. He was in the back, Buffy's head resting on his lap while she was stretched out across the seat; her five foot three inch frame serving her well for a change in the cramped space. He tried to make her as comfortable as possible without letting her fall asleep. Giles was very adamant about that, treating his Slayer as you would anyone who had suffered a concussion. And Angel agreed with his judgment, even though he was sure Buffy would be fine if she were allowed to sleep a little, but he wasn't about to take any unnecessary chances with her than Giles was prepared to.

With Giles' small field first aid kit, he had cleaned and dressed the gash; that was already healing, in Buffy's side as best he could on

the go, but the temporary bandage would have to be changed as soon as they reached their center of operations. It was *theirs*, which no longer included him. Before he had lost his soul to Angelus the second time, the library had become a welcome setting for the vampire as he would often be there when Buffy, Giles, and the other Slayerettes would devise and plan their strategy against the forces of darkness that were threatening the world.

Angel knew better than most living beings that time was the greatest healing power, but then he'd gone through nearly a century of healing before he finally took back any semblance of life. And that was also with the help of an annoying fashion-challenged demon who had literally taken him off the dirty Manhattan streets. The humans in this tight circle of friends did not have the luxury to brood for several decades to heal the pain of the rift he had caused them during the last year. But in a way, despite being mortal; or perhaps because of it, they were stronger than he was, and he envied the strong will he never had even before he was turned into a vampire. If he had been half the person anyone of them were, he may very well not be a vampire even now.

In the end, only time would tell.

He had kept whispering to Buffy throughout the whole ride, keeping her eyes from closing all the way. At the same time, he cleaned the blood off her face and tried to keep the worry from his with each new bruise and cut he discovered. Because of her weakened condition, he knew she wasn't healing as fast as she usually did. They had treated each others wounds often enough to be familiar with their own healing prowess, and she was still healing faster than any normal human. But that did little to ease his concern.

Faith, on the other hand, seemed to come through her whole ordeal without so much as a scratch. A little ragged and tired, and in need of a change in attire, she was almost perfect. At least visibly, he thought. Her flippant remark that she had "died," to explain what had happened to her, held more meaning than she was willing to reveal. Angel had thought he had his barriers well guarded, but, in Faith, he found someone far superior in that department. Angel's brooding skills had come from his dealing with his cursed soul and the consequences his demon had wrought on others for over a hundred years; but that had ended when he had met a small sixteen year old Slayer. Faith's came from the pain she had suffered far too young, inflicted upon her by others; Angel recognized this in the younger Slayer. This didn't exactly make them kindred spirits, but it did say they had much more in common than either one of them would ever admit to each other.

Giles seemed to realize this also and had only asked her a few questions before he lapsed into silence and Faith had laid her head back, eyes closed, and pretended to sleep. Angel knew she was pretending because her heart rhythm had not slowed.

Saturday morning found the school parking lot deserted and Giles pulled up to the front of the side entrance. Faith carried Giles' weapon bag as she padded barefoot up the steps to the door and used the keys her Watcher had handed her to unlock it. Giles was helping Angel slide Buffy out of the car and he stayed near as the vampire carried her into the school, where Faith held the door open for them. Walking ahead of him; likewise, the school was deserted as well, she

and Giles opened the double doors to the library for them. The Watcher directed him to his office and Angel gently set Buffy down on the leather sofa, her leather jacket being used as a small blanket.

He saw that her eyes were closed. "Buffy," he said. "C'mon, now. Don't go to sleep." He put a hand to the side of her cheek less bruised and felt the warmth of her skin. True he wasn't very qualified to gauge temperature, but she did feel hotter than she usually did. "Buffy?" A little worried, he called over his shoulder. "Giles. I think Buffy's starting to burn up."

Faith preceded Giles into the office. "Faith, please sit down." She obviously didn't need to be told twice and she slumped behind his desk. He pulled out another bag from a closet cabinet and Angel made room for him as he knelt beside Buffy.

"Is she going to be okay?" Angel asked.

"Her healing attributes are being taxed right now, due to her many injuries, which would explain the fever." He gently lifted her eyelids to examine her eyes. "No abnormal dilation, so I don't believe she's suffered a concussion. I believe it's safe to let her start resting. She's going to need all her strength to heal herself, especially with so little time."

"What do you mean?" the vampire asked, fearing he already knew the answer.

"He means she needs to be in top form for when we face the Slayer Vampire again, tonight."

Angel turned to see the younger Slayer with her head propped up on the palm of her hand, her elbow on the desk. She looked tired but she had been paying attention. He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw a bit of concern in her eyes.

Angel glanced at Giles. "You can't be serious?"

"I'm afraid so." Giles didn't look at him as he searched for something in the bag.

"There's no way Buffy will be ready to face that thing again. Nowhere near a hundred percent."

This time Giles did look at him. "Well, we really don't have a choice now, do we? Not only are we dealing with the Order of Taraka again, but with a new powerful demon; whose origins we haven't a clue about, as well as a newly turned Slayer. I certainly have no plans of going after them when the sun sets tonight, but I fear they will be hunting us." He had pulled out a small syringe wrapped in plastic and a small vial of liquid. "And you know as well as I do, Angel, that there are many day-walkers in the Taraka Order. They don't need to wait for nightfall."

Angel was forced to agree, even if he didn't like it. He nodded at the syringe. "What's that?"

"Something to ease the pain."

He watched as Giles swathed a small spot on Buffy's arm and gave her the injection. He put the syringe and vial away and turned his attention to the bandage on her side. Angel had ripped the shirt along the seam to tend to the wound. The gash itself was a few inches long, starting from the middle of her side to just under her breast. Taking care to keep as much of his Slayer's lingerie covered as possible, the Watcher removed the blooded gauze and conducted the examination with a doctor's manner.

"Hmm," he commented. "It will need a few stitches. I'm going to need Willow here. Faith, can you give her a call?"

"What's the number?" she asked.

"I'll do it." Angel stood up. But instead of using the phone on the desk next to the younger Slayer, he opted to use the one out on the check-out counter. Faith watched him leave until she could not see him without turning her head, then returned her gaze to the Slayer on the sofa. Giles wondered if there would ever be a stable atmosphere with her and Angel in the same room. Considering how seriously Faith took her Slayer duties, he truly doubted it.

Angel found it strange to be calling Willow. Not only because he would usually just stop by during the night rather than call someone, but this would also be the first time he would speak to her in depth since before his soul was taken away. True, one of the first things he did during their brief reunion, a couple of months ago, was save her life from a horrible death, he doubted that alone would alleviate the discomfort she and the others still felt towards him. Not that he could ever blame them. When he had first met Buffy, they had always been known to him as "Buffy's friends," but sometime during that first year, he realized they had become his friends as well. Even Xander . . . sort of. He had come to treasure that friendship and had kept it within him, along with Buffy's love, even when his soul was banished, and later, when he was sucked into the demon dimension. Which was why he had acted on pure instinct, when he had regained consciousness to find Willow in danger, and had pulled her away just in time.

She answered on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Willow."

"Yes? This is she--" There was a pause for a few seconds. "Angel?"

"Yeah."

"What are you-- I mean-- That is-- Yes?"

Angel smiled sadly into the phone. "I'm sorry to wake you so early."

"Oh, no. That's no problem. Just a little surprise-- hey, it's bedtime for you anyway, I mean the sun is up. Not that you have a curfew, but--" It sounded as if she covered the mouthpiece but he was able to hear her mumble something to herself, and when she came back her voice was steadier. "What can I do for you, Angel?"

"It's Buffy. She's been hurt." He heard Willow gasp but she didn't

say anything, even though he knew she wanted to. "We're here at the library. Giles is taking care of her, but he said he needs your help. Faith is here too."

"I'll be right there." There was no hesitation in her voice anymore. "I'll stop by to pick up Xander on the way, too."

"Good. I'm sure we can use all the help we can get. There's something big going down and we don't have a lot of time. We'll fill you in as soon as you get here."

"Okay. She's going to be all right, isn't she?"

"Giles seems to think so. That's usually good enough."

"Yeah. But I won't feel better until I see her myself. Well, I better get moving."

"And be careful," he told her, sincerely.

"We will. And Angel." She paused for just a moment. "Thanks. And for calling."

"Sure." With that, they hung up.

End of part Seven

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Eight

CHAPTER EIGHT

Not more than twenty minutes later, the two Slayerettes rushed into the library.

"Giles!" they called out as they hurried around the counter. Even though they made record time, they still looked presentable. Willow's shoulder length red hair was neat and hers and Xander's loose fitting clothes were as adequate as usual.

Angel stepped out of the office to meet them. He didn't venture much farther from the doorway or he would risk getting caught in the sunlight coming from the high windows and skylight of the library. Giles had found a folded cardboard box to place on the sill of the window in the office, to keep the sunlight out.

"She's inside," he said, stepping aside to let them enter.

"How is she?" they both asked in unison.

Giles look up from his task. "Thank you, for coming. She should be fine. You're just in time, Willow. I am about ready to start the sutures and I'd appreciate your help."

Willow only stood there for a few seconds looking at her best friend laying, on the couch, looking so-- helpless. She had never seen Buffy like this before. Well, there was that one time last year when she had been put in the hospital, after almost dying, she thought. But then she had still recovered fairly quickly and even managed to slay an invisible demon who had been terrorizing the children's ward. But as serious as that time was, she looked three times worse here.

"Oh, Buffy," she whispered.

"Willow," Giles said, gently.

She snapped herself out of it and moved over to his side to lend him a hand.

"Oh, man," Xander finally said. Then his anger flared. "Why didn't you take her to the hospital? What's she doing here?"

Giles didn't react to the young man's anger but said, "The hospital would not be able to do any more for her than we can. And, for our purposes, the library is a more secure location."

"How so?" Xander demanded.

"It's easier to guard. And we have a Slayer and a vampire as our first line of defense."

"As long as the bad guys don't stand in the sunlight, that is." He shot a glare at the vampire in question, not succeeding in getting a reaction. Then Xander looked at Faith and noted she was resting her head on the desk top, her eyes closed. "And the Slayer." Eyes still closed, Faith raised a hand and gave a tiny wave. Xander turned back to Giles. "This does not really instill confidence in me, you know." He missed Faith's wave turning into the bird behind his back. Angel was the only one who caught it and could not fight the grin that appeared on his face.

Just growing a little impatient, Giles looked at the young man. "Xander, I feel your concerns, but trust me. If I thought for one moment --one instant-- that Buffy's life was in jeopardy, I would be the first one demanding we get her to the hospital."

But Xander was not done pleading his case yet. "But look at her! She's never been this bad, before. Has she Willow?"

"Well. . ." His long time childhood friend seemed to share his concerns, if not as vocally as him. "You have to admit, Giles. I can't remember a time when Buffy's looked like this. Not even when Angel put her in the hospital." She glanced at the vampire. "I mean, not that you meant to beat her up, but it was your demon. . . ."

"It's okay," he said, even though the shame was evident in his eyes. "I remember. But Buffy was already weak from the flu. It made her easier to hurt. And she wasn't able to heal as fast."

Before an uncomfortable silence could settle, Giles cleared his throat. "Yes. And Buffy was at full strength last night. How ever severe her injuries, I have every confidence that she will recover. But, she will need our help to do so."

"What about Faith?" Willow asked, noticing her haggard appearance for the first time.

The Slayer in question finally opened her eyes and lifted her head. "Hey, I'm fine. Aside from needing a shower and breakfast in bed, I'm

five-by-five."

Giles was working on the first suture but spared her a glance. "But you said so yourself, Faith, that you had died."

"Died?" Xander exclaimed.

"Died?" Willow echoed.

"I was being dramatic, Giles," Faith said, trying to sound matter-of-factly. "We Slayer's do tend to do that every once in a while. It's all parcel of the whole gig. And I'm not really sure what happened back there."

"But the next Slayer was called," Giles said.

"Whoa! `Next Slayer?'" offered Xander.

"All I know is that this demon-sorcerer guy has the ability to stop someone's heart."

"And he just raised a hand to you? He didn't chant a spell or say anything?"

Faith shrugged. "Nothing. He took me down without batting an eyelash. If he had any." The image of the demon must have entered her thoughts for she almost shuddered. This was really starting to freak Xander out, if something could freak out Faith this way, and do this to Buffy.

"Did you get a good look at it?" Giles asked, concentrating on his other Slayer.

"Yeah. Too good. I'm trying not to remember."

"Well, we can research the demon later."

Willow and Xander were looking expectantly at the others in the room, waiting for the "Cliff Notes" update that usually followed such an exchange. But, when it seemed that one would have to be prompted, Xander finally raised his hand.

"Hey, I hate coming into the middle of the movie as much as the next person, and I know no one is eager to be assigned the recap, but me and Will or still in need of flashbacks here."

Giles only glanced up quickly. "Yes. Sorry. I guess I'll go first, then."

"Yeah," Faith agreed, once more resting her head on the desk but positioned to listen. "I missed this part myself."

Giles gave a descriptive, if abridged version, of what happened through the night starting with the phone call he received from the Watcher's Council. The activation of the new Slayer, Angel's demon visitor, and discovering that the new Slayer was here in Sunnydale and a vampire. Throughout the retelling, Faith had supplied her parts in what she guessed were the appropriate places. Needless to say, Willow and Xander's jaws dropped several times.

Ironically, they finished the story just as Giles snipped the end of the last suture in Buffy's side. Willow silently praised the Watcher for his skills. The stitches were small and set neatly along the wound. She doubted there would even be a scar left, but then again, with Buffy's healing ability there probably wouldn't be a scar either way.

"Angel did say something 'big' was happening," she finally said.

"And is anybody else thinking he should win the award for 'Best Understatement of the Year?'" Xander quipped. This got a severe look from Angel and a chuckle from Faith. Although the teenager wasn't as adamant about his dislike of the vampire as he used to be, he still couldn't resist taking verbal jabs at him. But then, he realized, he was like that with all of his friends. Xander would have shook his head, had he been alone, for having the words "friend" and "Angel" in the same thought. And it occurred to him that Faith was the person in the room who liked the vampire the least, probably on general Slayer principals alone; but that was something he never would have thought possible just a couple of months ago.

"And we must start devising our strategy against attack from all fronts," Giles said.

Willow was applying a thin bandage over the stitches. "The bad guys do have an impressive offense: the Order of Taraka; this demon-sorcerer that stopped Faith's heart, with a platoon of vampires; which includes a vampiric Slayer. Our own defensive line-up consists of one vampire and two Slayers; granted a formidable fighting team, but with one Slayer in a near coma and the other having her heart stopped at least twice in one night, I'm suddenly thinking 'sudden death.'"

She looked up to find everyone in the office staring at her. Heat suddenly rushed into her cheeks. "What?"

"Come clean, Will," Xander said. "You're a closet ESPN viewer."

Willow opened her mouth but couldn't think of anything to say. Giles removed his glasses and wiped them with a handkerchief. He winced, noticing the pain in his bruised hand for the first time in hours. "Very intriguing. Faith how are you feeling? Are you sure you're all right?"

The younger Slayer was suddenly the focus of attention, which she really didn't want to be, but the concern she saw in the Watcher's eyes did fill her with a certain warmth. Her previous Watcher had fussed over her as well, but she never had the emotional display this Watcher showed so readily. Although it probably wasn't as evident to the people in this room, who saw him as a stuffy Brit most of the time, but Giles seemed to go against the mold for Watchers, based on her own experiences with her first Watcher as well as her short time with Gwendolyn Post; who did turn out to be evil in the end.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just tired."

It seemed that Giles wanted to say more, but Faith was grateful when he put his glasses back on and didn't push. "Then you best get

cleaned up and put on some dry clothes. No need to push your luck."

"Sounds like a plan." She stood up. "But I don't have anything else to wear."

Xander's head snapped up, but he quickly looked away when she glanced at him, suddenly growing an interest in a book he pulled off a shelf.

"Buffy keeps some clothes stashed here," Willow said, getting up and opening the closet cabinet. "You are a little taller than she is but then Buffy usually doesn't have clothes as tight as yours." She quickly added, "Not that that's a bad thing, or to imply that Buffy isn't as--"

"Slutty?" Faith offered.

"No! No, I wasn't thinking that at all! I--"

Faith smiled at her. "Just joking Willow."

"Oh." She laughed nervously. "Either way, I'm going to stop talking for a little while."

"Uh, Faith," Giles spoke up. "If you can help Willow take Buffy with you to the girls' locker room you can get her cleaned up as well."

"Are you sure we should move her?" Angel asked.

"Right now, she needs to get as much rest as possible. We should make her as comfortable as we can. And besides, they can check to see if there are any further injuries we, uh, may have missed."

"Sure. No problem." Faith moved over to the blonde Slayer. "C'mon, private Buffy, time to hit the showers." She started to ease her off the sofa.

Buffy stirred and her eyes opened slightly. "Shower?"

"Yeah, Willow and I are going to make sure you don't drop the soap."

"I know how to take a shower by myself," she said, dazedly. "I've been taking showers since I turned twenty-one."

Xander frowned. "Man, Buffy really can't handle her drugs, can she?"

Willow looked at him. "You don't know, Xander. Maybe Buffy's the kind of girl who takes the time to enjoy a nice long bath-- Oh, supplied naughty image. Sorry, I forgot. Not supposed to be talking right now."

"Uh, Willow," Giles said.

She nodded and grabbed more of Buffy's clothes. Faith had Buffy on her feet now, but it looked like she wasn't going to be doing any walking. Angel stepped forward.

"I can take her."

Faith shot him a look. "You wish. Don't worry `long-tooth,' I'm just as macho as you are." With that she lifted the drowsy slayer into her arms but exaggerated a grunt. "Man, B! You really need to lay off the stakes."

With everyone standing now, the office had suddenly become a little crowded. Angel and Xander walked out first so the girls could leave and they headed out of the library. As they passed Angel Buffy looked up.

"Angel!" She reached out and grabbed the lapel of his coat, causing Faith to stop.

He wrapped his hand around hers. "You're going to be okay, Buffy. I promise."

"Oh, I know, Angel," she said, dazedly. "You always say that. You're my guardian Angel! Just. . . only a vampire."

Faith said, "Yeah, well, where we're going, boys --even boys over a two-hundred years old-- are not allowed."

"Maybe someone should be there to stand guard," he suggested. This got him a look from Faith and Willow. "I mean outside the door." Faith and Willow continued to give him the look. "Outside the locker room door."

Xander chuckled lightly and rescued him by putting a hand on Angel's shoulder and pulling him away. He removed his hand as they watched the girls disappear through the double doors.

"You're probably thinking the same thing I am?" Xander asked.

"How vulnerable they're going to be in the shower?" he said, seriously.

Xander nodded. "So you **are** thinking the same thing I am." Angel shot him a look. "Don't worry, Faith has had plenty of experience fighting monsters in the nude."

End of part Eight

2. Part 9 to Part 14

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Nine

CHAPTER NINE

As Xander and Angel started back to Giles' office, Xander noticed the message light blinking on the answering machine. He took a closer look at it.

"Uh, Giles," he said. "You got, like, about twenty messages here."

"Oh?" Giles, who had just finished putting everything away, stepped

out of the office behind the counter. "It must be the Council." He saw the question on Xander's face. "Well, when they told me about the new Slayer being called--"

"The conversation was pretty much over for you, huh?" The Watcher nodded a bit sheepishly. "You hung up on them. You the man, Giles. Not afraid to let the bosses know who's more important."

"I appreciate your approval of my rebelliousness, but it does reflect rather poorly in the eyes of the Council."

"Uh-huh," the teenager nodded gravely. "But until I see any of the Tweed of the Round Table down here giving us a hand in the battle with the dark side, a Watcher's gotta do what a Watcher's gotta do."

Giles narrowed his eyebrows, not sure whether to be offended or thank the young man. "Yes. Well, we do need to begin our research. I'll check in with the Council. They must be informed of what happened to the new Slayer. Angel, you should be all right if you stay close to my office and out of the direct light. But in a couple of hours you may want to retreat to the basement."

"Thanks, I'll be fine, Giles," the vampire assured him.

"Very well. Xander go grab the volumes of Dramius, he does have writings about the Order of Taraka. Bring a few for Angel. Maybe this isn't the first time Faith's demon has dealt with them."

Xander crossed the library to retrieve the books and Giles stepped into his office closing the door. He lifted the phone and dialed a very long distant number. It only rang once when a woman's voice answered.

"Hello, how may I help you?"

"This is Rupert Giles, uh," he thought for just a second. "The code word is 'giraffe.' G-I-R--"

"Yes, Mr. Giles," the woman interrupted. "Mr. Travers has been expecting your call."

"Quentin Travers?"

"One moment, sir, while I transfer your call."

The line was reconnected before Giles could say anything. It began ringing, but after the third ring was picked up.

"Rupert Giles?" the gruff voice asked.

"Yes, sir. I apologize it took so long in reporting in, but I had to see to the well being of my Slayer."

"Mr. Giles," Travers said sternly. "Your Slayer is dead. Or, at least, one of them is. A terrible lost to be sure."

He was taken aback by the callousness of the older man's words. Giles wondered, briefly, if he had ever sounded like that when he had first met Buffy. He dearly hoped not. Giles said, "I don't mean to

disappoint you, Mr. Travers, but I assure you both of my Slayers are alive and in reasonably good health."

"That cannot be possible," Travers insisted.

"No, there is no mistake. They are both with me now."

"Mr. Giles, we have confirmed that the next Slayer has been activated."

"Yes, sir, of course. Actually, it would be most helpful if you can provide me with as much information as you can about this new Slayer?"

"I'm sure you are aware that knowledge of the Slayer is on a need to know basis?"

"Yes, I do indeed." Giles was starting to feel a little impatient. "However, I think you'll agree with me when I tell you that this is an extraordinary situation."

"How so?"

"Because, she is here in Sunnydale, right now. And she has been turned into a vampire."

"That cannot be possible."

"I'm afraid it is, Mr. Travers," Giles continued sternly. "Now, please. The Slayers are going to have to face this creature and she's a Slayer and vampire combined. She is stronger and faster than either of them, and she withstood a stake to the heart. Tell me what I need to know, sir."

Willow and Faith had discovered no new injuries as they helped Buffy shower. Now she was sitting on a bench in the girl's locker room, hovering just between sleep and consciousness, while Willow tended to her. She had helped Buffy get dressed into some gray cargo pants and a dark blue sleeveless top. Willow had the top pulled up over the Slayer's midriff as she applied a fresh bandage to her stitches. She was back in the same clothes she arrived in, although her hair was still wet.

Not far from them, Faith had finished slipping into a pair of one of Buffy's baggier sweat pants, which fit her a little snugly. She also put on a pair of tennis shoes she happened to 'find' in one of the lockers. "B's clothes fit a little tight," she commented, pulling on a white tank top. "Good thing she has a bigger butt or these wouldn't even fit."

Buffy stirred slightly, her eyes opening halfway. "Hey, did she just say something I need to kick her ass for?"

"Uh, no," Willow said, giving the brunette a stern look. Faith smiled back with a tilt of her head. "She said you both wear the same size."

Faith rolled her eyes and was about to put on a sweat shirt jacket when Willow noticed something. "Faith, when did you get that tattoo?"

"What do you mean?" She turned to show her right arm displaying her barbed wire tattoo. "I've had this one for a long time."

"I know about that one. I mean *that* one."

Faith saw where the redhead was pointing and looked at her left arm. And her blood ran cold. "Son of a bitch!" she shouted. Then she hurled her left fist into the door of the nearest locker and effectively caved it in.

The crash almost made Willow jump out of her skin. Even Buffy jumped, then held a hand to her head. "Oww!" she whined.

"Faith, what's wrong?" she tried to call out, but the Slayer was already running full steam out of the locker room.

Xander brought a few more books over to the counter, where Angel, on the other side, was still scanning through one of the Dramius volumes. Giles was in his office still on the phone talking to the Watcher's Council, he supposed. He idly wondered who those guys really were. A secret society of a bunch of British, tweed-wearing men and women who were fated with the training and guiding of the world's Slayers. Why is it that the good guys are always out-numbered, he thought. He looked at Angel. But, then again, the home team does have its share of unusual players also.

"So, you guys are pretty sure that this new vampire is the next Slayer?" he asked.

"That's what it sounds like. I haven't seen it myself, but it is very powerful." The vampire only glanced up before turning the page. "There're not many demons that can overmatch Buffy like that."

Angel sounded worried. But then, Xander could not remember a time when the vampire didn't sound worried when it concerned a certain blonde Slayer. He opened his book but didn't look in it. "Faith seems to be a very good Slayer."

"She definitely knows how to fight," Angel commented.

"But I doubt we'll be able to stop this thing without Buffy."

Angel looked at Giles through the glass door to his office. "I'm sure Giles is getting more information from this 'Watcher's Council' on this new Slayer. Hopefully there'll be something useful we can use against her."

"Yeah. He's really thrown himself into research mode with a vengeance. He's become Super Watcher. But he's not looking too good. He still looks better than Buffy, though."

"He's had a rough night. Several hours ago he was told one of his Slayers was dead. He finds her alive but then his other Slayer is nearly killed. And now we're faced with a demon more powerful than both Slayers. Not to mention its master--"

Xander raised his hands. "Okay! Okay! I get the picture. You don't have to be so dramatic! Sheesh."

"Sorry. Must be my honed brooding skills." The teen gave him an exasperated look, not sure whether it was for the vampire's off-handishness or the fact he tried to make a joke. "I'm just saying: it's a lot for one person, even one as reserved as Giles, to deal with in such a short time."

Genuine concern filled Xander's voice. "I don't think he's ever seen Buffy like this. She's been roughhoused before, but this one was particularly brutal. I was there when Buffy and Faith went at it that time she tried to kill you."

"But they weren't trying to kill each other."

"So this is what happens when two Slayers go at it in a no-holds-barred-winner-take-the-title fight?"

"It's going to be even worse, next time."

"But next time, we'll be there to help her."

"That's right--" Angel trailed off. He was looking at Xander's book. "What's that?"

"What?" Angel pointed to the open page. "Whoa. How do vampires say 'cha-ching!' Here's our demon."

"We can't be sure until Faith can confirm this."

Xander started reading. At least the passages that were in English. "Well look. It says something about a faceless demon or a demon with no distinguishable features."

Angel turned the book so they could both see it. "'The ability to control its minions.' Faith did say the demon had some kind of control over the Slayer Vampire. We may have a match. We need to tell Giles."

* * *

"Mr. Giles, when this unfortunate business is settled please give me another call with your full report," Quentin Travers said.

"Of course," Giles replied. "This is a rather unprecedented scenario. And I do appreciate all the information, sir."

"Tell me, Mr. Giles. I understand it will be Miss Summers' birthday very soon. Her 18th birthday, I believe."

Surprised by the sudden change of subject, Giles answered, "Uh, yes, sir. It will indeed."

"Good," Travers said. "We'll have much to discuss when you call. Good luck, Mr. Giles."

Before he could say anything, the line was disconnected. Giles frowned at the phone for just a moment before hanging it up. Whatever it was, he was sure it could wait til later. He slid his glasses back on, which he hadn't been aware he had removed during the phone call, and stepped out of his office. Angel and Xander were looking at him

expectantly.

"Received some rather interesting news from the Council. It appears--"

He was cut off when the swinging doors of the library burst open with a very amissed Slayer charging into the room.

"Giles! We got trouble!" Faith's expression silenced the three men at the counter and she marched right up to it and slammed her left elbow on top.

"Faith?" Giles said, uncertainly.

"This is how that bastard was able to stop my heart!" They all leaned in to examine the weird tattoo design on her upperarm. "I saw the same tat on the Slayer vamp. When it tried to bite me the demon did something and its tattoo flared up and burned it."

"The tattoo?" he asked. Faith nodded.

"That would concur with what we found," Angel said.

Xander slid the book across to Faith. "Does this guy look familiar to you, Faith?"

The brunette looked at the open page and her eyes widened. "Son of a bitch! Who is this guy?" she demanded.

"My Latin is a little rusty--"

"The Faceless One," Angel supplied.

"The Faceless One?" Giles said. "Let me see that." He read over the page quickly, then, in a whisper, said, "Oh dear."

Xander and Faith said, in unison, "I hate when you say that." They exchanged a knowing look.

"If I'm right, we may be in more trouble than I thought." The Watcher quickly disappeared back into his office.

Waiting, Xander leaned over the counter and saw Giles picking up books and flipping through pages.

"Well? Giles, what gives?"

"Ah," Giles said, and emerged with another book. "Here we are." He set the book on the counter and the other three tried to see what he was looking at. But then he raised his eyes to address them in a somber voice. "The, uh, Faceless One is Oranstone."

"Oran?" Angel asked.

"The demon you guys let go, last night?" asked Faith.

"Are you sure?" Angel again.

Giles glanced down at the book again. "If this information is accurate, and I believe it is, the Two-Faced Demon is also known as

`He Without a Face' or the `Faceless One."

Xander spoke up. "Then why is it called the Two-Faced Demon if he doesn't have a face?"

"Oran is a shapeshifter," Angel said.

"So he can appear as anyone or anything?" Faith asked.

"But the Watchers were not aware of its shapechanging abilities, at least, not that my research had uncovered," Giles said.

"So, I take it," Xander said, "the faceless thing is his true form."

"It would appear so." The Watcher looked at Angel. "Angel?"

"I've never seen Oran in her true form. But why would Oran send us to her hideout?"

"Her?" Faith asked.

"The Oranstone we met last night was a woman," Giles told her.

"Oh." Faith gave the vampire a meaningful look.

"Faith," Giles chided.

The Slayer looked at him innocently. "What? I didn't say anything."

Giles went on. "But that is a valid point. Why would the demon lead us to--" He trailed off as something occurred to him. He removed his glasses. "Unless--"

"To lure us into a trap," Angel finished.

"That creature did almost kill Buffy," Xander said. "And Angel got into a rumble with a few of his brethren."

"But that was a pretty lame-ass ambush, if you ask me," Faith offered. "True, the Slayer vamp is one tough cookie; and this Oran did mention she wasn't up to her full strength yet, but still. Why didn't they gang-bang in force."

"Maybe they didn't have the numbers needed for a coordinated attack," Giles said.

"I doubt that, Giles," Faith said. "On my way out, I got in two confirmed kills, but there were at least ten more of them. And that's not counting our fanged girl and Angel's friend."

"And I happened upon the three I met while they were hunting. They weren't expecting me."

"And the creature did say its master didn't want her facing Buffy." Giles was worrying one of the tips of his glasses against his lip as he thought. "I don't think the objective was to kill us."

"Then what was the objective?" Xander asked.

"I wish I knew."

They were all silent, in pondering thought. Giles focused on Angel when the vampire tensed just slightly. When he saw his eyes, Giles knew he had just thought of something he did not like. "Angel?"

Angel looked at him as if debating on whether or not to tell them. He looked at the others one by one, unsure.

"What is it?" Giles prompted.

"We were all separated," he finally said. "Alone."

"What does that--" Giles trailed off as understanding swept through him.

Xander got it too. "And Oran is a shapeshifter." He looked over the people he was with. "Why do I suddenly feel that one of us isn't really here?"

End of Part Nine

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Ten

CHAPTER TEN

"Wait a minute," Faith was the first to speak up. "You're saying one of us could be Oranstone?"

"I'm willing to bet that Xander and Willow are who they're supposed to be, since they weren't even there," Angel said.

"I'll agree with that," Giles said. "But really, I doubt Oranstone replaced anyone of us. The chances are just too slim."

"But then if you are Oranstone," Xander pointed out, "wouldn't you want to draw away suspicion?"

"Xan-man does have a point there," Faith said.

"But then again, last night the Council said you were dead." Faith gave him a hard look. "Who's to say the real Faith really isn't dead and you're that Oran-demon posing as her?"

"You want to know who?" she said, angrily. "I'm to say!"

He raised his hands in defense. "I'm just playing devil's advocate here. Since I'm the only true safe member in this party."

"I knew I shouldn't have brought it up," commented Angel.

"Don't get me started with you, Dead Boy." He saw the look the vampire gave him. "Okay, he's Angel." He looked at Giles. "And you are definitely the G-man. How could any demon know any of the titles of the books in this library?"

"Xander, we really don't have time to waste with this--"

The teenager cut Giles off. "I'm just saying we should at least be sure we don't have an impostor here. If we don't, we're all going to have that nagging question, what if. Besides, it seems everybody here is the right person. So, I guess there is no problem--"

He stopped as realization hit them all at the same time.

"Buffy!"

"No. It's not Buffy," Angel insisted.

"How can you be sure?" Xander asked.

"I saw Buffy fighting the Slayer Vampire," Faith said. "It can't be her."

"It would certainly be a good way to convince us that it isn't her," Xander retorted. "And she really didn't talk much, did she?"

"She wasn't in any condition to talk much," Giles insisted.

"Exactly!"

"That's pretty thin," Angel said.

"I'll give you that," Xander amended, "but right now, Willow is alone with her. And I hope to hell that I'm wrong." He pushed off from the counter and headed for the doors.

Faith fell into step with him. "Hey, wait up. If Buffy really is the demon, you're sure not gonna be able to do anything about it."

Before they reached the doors, however, they swung open as Willow walked in assisting a still groggy Buffy.

"Willow!" Xander hurried to her side. "Are you okay?"

She gave him a confused look. "Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Oh," he stammered, aware that if Buffy was Oranstone in disguise it would not do to tip their hand. "It's just that you guys were gone so long. We started to worry."

"Here, let me help you." Faith took Buffy's free arm over her shoulders and eased the blonde Slayer from the redhead. Xander casually put an arm around Willow's shoulders and tried not to look hurried as he led her away.

"Buffy," Faith said. "How do you feel?"

"Oh," Buffy responded. "Need to lie down."

"Sure. Let's go back to Giles' office. Hey, you remember the first time we met?"

Buffy lifted her head a little to look at the brunette with half closed eyes. "Yeah."

"What was I doing?"

"Huh?"

Faith smiled. "C'mon. Tell me."

Confused, Buffy said, "You were slaying a vampire."

"No, I meant before that."

It seemed that Buffy was having a hard time thinking, but after a few seconds she said, "You were dancing *with* the vampire you slayed."

"Yeah," Faith said, with a genuine smile this time. "That was pretty cool, suckering in that vamp like that, huh?"

"Uh, sure," Buffy said. Then added, "I never thought to dance with a vampire first before staking him. Sounds like fun."

"Well," Giles said, as Faith led Buffy into his office. "I think everyone can rest easier knowing we're all who we're supposed to be."

"So you thought that Buffy might have been the demon?" Willow exclaimed after Xander had quickly filled her in. "That's a relief that she's not. I don't like the idea of a demon seeing me naked." Everyone was looking at her again. "Oh, uh, forget I said that last part."

"But that still leaves the question open: why did Oran lead us down there?" Angel said.

"Maybe to throw us off," Xander said, as he and Willow approached the counter. "Maybe their hideout isn't really there?"

"It has to be," Faith said, emerging from the office. "I escaped through an underwater river and was washed up on the beach. They're there."

"She might have just been trying to avoid a fight with Buffy," Angel suggested. "Oran may have thought I would have smelled a lie, so she told us something that was true. But then the Slayer Vampire took it upon itself to challenge her instead."

"That's all nice and everything, but we still have a problem right here." She indicated the new tattoo on her arm.

"I think it's safe to say that you're safe from Oran's control for the moment," Giles said. "It seems the demon cannot control its minions over long distances. You haven't been hearing any voices or had any strong impulses urging you to do things you normally would not do?"

"Voices? In my head? Like if I were crazy?"

"No. As if you were being spoken to telepathically?"

"No. Nothing. My head's complete silent." She shot a quick look at

Xander when the teen opened his mouth. He closed it without saying anything. She turned back to Giles. "But what if it's on its way over here right now? Maybe it can use it as a homing beacon."

"There's a scary thought," Xander did said.

"I'm sure there's a spell we can use to block out the power of the tattoo," Willow suggested. "We just need to find it."

"Then we best start looking." Giles turned to Faith. "We'll handle the research on the spell and Oranstone, you try to get some rest. You and Buffy are certainly going to need it."

"Cool. At least I know I can do that with no problem." The younger Slayer retreated back to the office and grabbed a spare blanket, spreading it on the floor close to where Buffy was on the sofa. She bundled the sweat shirt jacket to use as a pillow.

* * * *

When Buffy opened her eyes, her cheek was pressed against something soft, and it felt very comfortable. Closing her eyes again, she stretched her body, releasing a sleepy sigh, and snuggled against the comfortable surface made warm from the heat of her cheek. Then she heard something that brought her out of her haze. A "thump-pump" sound that she instantly recognized as a heart beat. Just one and another did not follow. A long moment of silence.

She opened her eyes again and saw that her pillow was Angel. Her head was resting on his chest, the lapel of his coat brushed to the side so that her cheek had been laying against the cotton of his shirt, a flimsy barrier over his cool skin. His eyes were closed and his face was peaceful. Vampires did not breath in the same sense that humans did, but they still passed air in and out of their lungs, not to oxygenate them, just an involuntary "alive" habit they never could get rid of. Especially when they needed air to talk. And even though they were also considered dead, and you usually wouldn't find a pulse with a cursory examination, their hearts still beat. At an extremely slower rate. They still needed a way to push the blood they so craved through their veins.

Buffy let herself just lay there staring into his sleeping face. She realized she was smiling. Suddenly, she just wanted to stay like this forever. A moment she wanted to freeze and bask in all its glory. But she knew she couldn't. In fact, she should get up now.

She took in her surroundings. She was in Giles' office again. The blinds to the window looking into the library had been drawn shut and there was a very bright outline of sun around the cardboard covering the high window looking outside. She guessed it must be close to noon for it to be so bright. Probably what finally drove Angel from the library. He must've been burning the mid-day oil, she thought.

"See what happens when you stay up past your bedtime," she whispered. For his part, he just sighed slightly. She knew only direct sunlight could burn a vampire but being in close proximity to so much of it can really drain them. It was no wonder that Angel was sleeping like the dead. Pun and all.

She didn't remember him retreating into the office, but she could

recall waking up briefly to find him with his back against the sofa as he slept. She stayed awake just long enough to slide off and snuggle up to him on the floor. And they were alone. How long had they been here by themselves, she wondered, and had Xander commented on this? More than likely, yeah.

Xander? Willow was here, too. All her memories were a little fuzzy. Her last clear thoughts were of getting thrashed by that Slayer creature. What had Faith called it? Slayer Vampire? She also had faint recollection of Willow and Faith helping her take a shower. Looking back on that, that felt very weird. She was glad she couldn't remember most of it.

Before she let her head fall back against Angel's chest, Buffy let out a breath of resignation, and started to get up. The instant she began to rise, every part of her body screamed at her in pain. She opened her mouth but stopped whatever was coming out, so as not to disturb her vampire, and slowly let a long, silent breath out.

"Oww," she mouthed, when the pain faded.

Prepared for the pain this time, she pushed herself up again and managed to get to her feet. Clenching her teeth the whole time. She ran her hands through her hair brushing it out of her face. Spying her jacket and leather boots, she found that they were lost causes, until they were free of all the sand they'd collected. She slipped her feet into a pair of white sneakers, she kept stashed here, and pulled her brown leather jacket out of the cabinet. Giles had commented once how she had more clothes here than he did, considering that he spent far more time in the library than she did.

She stepped out of the office quietly and entered the library, closing the door softly behind her. She was instantly aware of a strong planty aroma in the air. It smelled like sage, mixed with something equally strong. Giles, Faith, and Willow were gathered around the center table, the surface cluttered with, what Buffy guessed was, spell casting materials. Xander was on the mezzanine overlooking the table, leaning on the railing, the book in his hands forgotten as he watched. There was a thin smoky haze coming from a small ceramic bowl, which was the focus of their attention.

"You want me to spit in that?" Faith asked Willow, making a disgusted face.

"Well, we need something to bind the spell to you specifically," the redhead answered, sheepishly. "And I figured this would be the easiest way."

"What other ways are there?"

Willow hesitated. "Uh, well, you can add a drop of your blood, a piece of finger nail, or toe nail, or you can. . ." She nodded her head trying to make the Slayer understand. "You know. . ."

Faith's eyebrows shot up as she realized what she was talking about. She immediately hocked back, making Buffy wince, and spat into the bowl, scattering the white smoke. A second later there was a small poof of darker blue smoke and the trio took a cautious step back as it spread into a small cloud.

"I can't leave you guys alone for a minute without you trying to blow things up," Buffy finally said.

Giles lowered the book he was using to dissipate the cloud and looked at her. "How do you feel?" he asked stepping over to her.

"I feel good," she said. She saw the look he gave her. "Hey, at least I was able to say it with a straight face."

"Still." He laid an arm around her shoulders and started to guide her toward the table. "You should try to move around as little as possible. Come sit down."

That was when a steady billow of reddish smoke began to rise from the bowl on the table. This time, even Faith looked a little worried.

"Or maybe not," Buffy said. Giles led her over to the carpeted steps to the upper level of the library. She lowered herself down and stopped with a moan. She quickly looked at her Watcher's concerned face. "It's nothing. Just a little sore." To prove her point, she sat the rest of the way down without a sound, though her teeth were clenched behind the smile she was showing him.

Xander came around the railing and sat down next to her. "Man, Buff, you really gave us a scare."

"Well, you know me. Have to be the center of attention all the time." She tilted her chin; which she found was one of the few movements she could make without pain, toward Willow's cloud making. "So what's going on?"

"The demon that had Faith prisoner branded her with its mark, so it would be able to control her."

"Control her?"

"It doesn't seem to be direct control," Giles explained. "At least, not yet. It's more obedience by punishment. The demon can inflict pain through its symbol, a tattoo. As well as control its subject's body functions. Such as her heart."

"So it did kill Faith."

"Temporarily, it would seem."

"But Willow's working on a spell that will protect her from the demon's influence," Xander said.

"Sounds like you guys have been doing a lot during my hiatus. How long was I out?"

"Nearly six hours," Giles said with a glance at his watch.

"So what do we know about this demon?"

"You guys already met," Xander told her. She frowned at him.

"It's Oranstone, Buffy," Giles supplied.

"Angel's friend." She seethed silently for a moment. "Looks like she and the Order of Taraka kissed and had by-gones."

"It would appear so," Giles said. "Or they may not know who Oranstone really is. After all, as far as they are concerned, they already killed her."

"I knew we shouldn't have let her go."

"We couldn't have known, Buffy. Not even Angel suspected her."

"A demon's a demon. Even one who says it doesn't take pleasure in torturing humans." She looked at her Watcher as something occurred to her. "But then capturing Faith was only a way for it to create this Slayer Vampire. Some sort of demon alchemist?"

Giles nodded with approval. "That follows. And I suspect that Oranstone's goal was to create more."

"Which would explain why she stopped the creature from killing Faith," Xander chipped in.

"Until Oran could kill Faith again. Bring her back. Then kill her again." Worry showed on Buffy's face. "Giles, how is this possible?"

"I'm not entirely sure."

"But that's not going to stop you from a long-winded theory, is it?" she teased him.

He smiled at that. He glanced at the table and saw that the bowl was no longer spouting rainbow smoke. "I think it's safe to join the others. You should all hear this." Buffy made a move to pull herself up, and inhaled sharply with pain. "Perhaps we should stay here?" Buffy nodded and relaxed again.

"Willow," Giles said. "Is everything ready?"

"Just about," the young girl replied. She was using a small wooden spoon to scoop the grounded contents from the bowl into a small leather pouch. When she was finished she pulled the thin leather string closing the pouch tight. She knotted a longer leather strap around it. She offered it to Faith. "You'll have to wear it at all times."

The Slayer accepted the pouch and looked it over. "You sure this is going to work?"

"Let's hope so. It's the best chance we've got to counter the demon's spell. If what you say is true, then this demon is very strong."

Faith seemed to consider this, then shrugged and slipped the leather strap over her head. She pulled her hair out from under the strap and let the pouch rest against her chest.

"Everyone," Giles called for attention. "I did gather some information on this. . . . Slayer Vampire, you called it?" He looked at

Faith. The brunette nodded. "The Council informed me that when they discovered that the next Slayer had been activated, they tried to contact her Watcher. They were unable to reach him. That was when they called me, because they assumed that one of you must have died in order for this Slayer to be called. Shortly after that, they sent someone to investigate why there was no answer."

Faith was sitting on the table, her legs crossed, and Willow had turned a chair around to face the Watcher, as he continued. "The new Slayer and her Watcher were missing. There were no signs of a struggle."

"Because they had been taken a while ago, right?" Faith spoke up. "I mean the new girl was already here before last night, I'm thinking."

"Yes, it does make sense. A great deal of planning went into your abduction. Though I assume they were planning on taking Buffy as well."

"I guess I was 'moe,'" she said. Giles frowned at her.

"Like in 'eenie meenie,'" Willow explained.

"Ah. The young girl's name is Noriko Amano. She came to America with her grandfather, from Japan, when she was four years old. When she was seven years old, her grandfather passed away and she was sent to an orphanage. At this time, the Watchers were already aware of her status as a potential Slayer. To better look after her, a Watcher, one Matthew Wallace, was assigned to her. He was positioned as a social worker and watched over her for the next few years.

"Wallace felt that he would inform Noriko of her status as a Slayer Candidate when she entered her teens, but there was an incident when she was eleven that determined that for him." Giles took a breath. "She was in the care of her foster parents at the time, when a vampire attacked them one night as they were returning home. Fortunately, Wallace had been keeping an eye on her. There had been a rash of mysterious killings which he suspected to be vampiric, putting him on alert. He could not stop the vampire from killing the foster parents, and what actually saved young Noriko was that she ran while the creature was still feeding. This gave Wallace the opportunity to sneak up on it and dispatch it before she was harmed."

Giles paused for a respectful moment. Buffy was staring at the floor in deep thought. He looked at Faith and she met his gaze steadily.

"Wallace revealed everything to her after that. Since then, she has been training as a Slayer."

"How old was she?" Willow asked, after a moment. "Or is, now?"

"She's sixteen."

"Which means she's been training for about six years," Xander added.

"So she's like really good?" Faith said.

"I was told she exhibited extraordinary talent."

"And with her vampire and slayer strengths, she must be mistress of kung-fu now," Xander said.

"But she doesn't have your experience, Buffy, Faith. This is not a no-win situation. Together I'm sure you can--"

"Giles, I staked her right through the heart and it only slowed her down. Is this what happens when a Slayer is turned into a vampire?"

"There are no chronicled cases of a Slayer ever being turned by a vampire, Buffy."

"But that doesn't mean it hasn't happened."

Giles didn't answer. He removed his glasses, not meeting her eyes. "I'll broaden my research of the Watchers' Diaries. Look for any entries or theories on Slayer Vampires. Maybe there's something there."

"And the rest of us?" asked Willow.

"Continue gathering information on Oranstone. We don't know how the demon's power is effecting this Slayer Vampire's own abilities."

"Would it make a difference if the girl was turned into a vampire before she was activated?" Faith asked.

"You mentioned that before," Buffy said.

"Yeah. After they brought me back when I `died,' she was already a vampire."

Resting the tip of his glasses against his bottom lip, thoughtfully, Giles said, "Interesting. But I suppose it makes sense." He noticed the looks that everyone was giving him. "In, uh, a morbid manner. If Noriko was activated before she was turned, her death to rise again as a vampire would activate the next Slayer, after her."

"I get it!" Willow spoke up. "It would be easier for the demon to kidnap the girls without their Slayer powers."

"Precisely. As well as to avoid having to contend with even more Slayers who would try to stop her."

"That's an even scarier thought," Xander said.

"Giles," Buffy said. "You said the Council did not know who would be the next Slayer until she's activated. So how did Oran know Noriko was going to be called next? There's no way she's that good a guesser."

"I wish I knew. We must find out more about Oranstone's powers. Perhaps she was able to influence whatever forces that are behind the choosing of the Slayers."

"Okay, we have a winner for scariest concept," Xander announced. "So what is our next move gonna be?"

"We still have to take these guys out," Faith put in.

"Yes," the Watcher agreed. "They must be stopped."

"But going up against two Slayers should present a challenge, despite the fact they outnumber us," Willow said. "What if they decide to leave?"

"All the evidence would suggest that Oranstine is attempting to build an army, or, at least, a formidable force of these Slayer hybrids. With Faith's escape, that is no longer possible. They require a Slayer. I doubt they'll leave empty-handed."

"So she'll still have the Order of Taraka on the payroll," Xander commented, with a shudder, obviously reminiscing about his own up-close experience with a certain man-of-bugs.

"And she'll be looking for more potential Slayers around the world." Buffy looked up at her Watcher. "Giles, what if Oranstine has the same method of locating Slayer Candidates as the Watcher's Council?"

"Another alarming possibility. But the Council assured me they will be taking steps to tighten security for these young girls. And with Oranstine still in Sunnydale, it's safe to assume they are not in any immediate danger."

"The only way to make sure she doesn't get her shapeshifting hands on anymore is to make sure she never leaves Sunnydale," Faith declared.

"Here, here," Buffy concurred. "But we still need to devise some kind of attack plan of our own. I don't really relish the idea of waiting for them to make the next move against us. Do we know for sure that Oranstine is a day walker?"

"Angel confirmed as much," Giles said. "And then, of course, the Order of Taraka are free to roam the day as well."

"Well, I think me and Faith were able to thin their ranks a little, last night."

"But there will always be more, Buffy. Kill one, and another will follow, and another and--"

"Giles," Buffy raised her hands. "I know. I was there for the flashback, remember? But they seemed to have gotten over that 'working alone' part. It looks like they're working in small groups now. Those two guys that had Faith's room staked out. For all we know they may be watching the school right now."

Buffy fell silent for a moment. Then her eyes widened with a frightening realization. Willow saw her friend's expression. "Your mom, Buffy!"

"I need to go home!" She grabbed the rail and pulled herself up.

Halfway up, she groaned and almost fell back. Xander was there and steadied her on her feet. Giles stepped close to help.

"Buffy, you must remain calm."

"Giles, my mom's all alone, right now. The Taraka guys aren't vampires, they can go in at anytime. I need to make sure she's safe, before they decide they can use her to get to me."

Giles knew her determination very well. "But not alone, you won't," her Watcher declared.

End of Part Ten

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Eleven

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"So what's the plan?" Xander asked as he turned the Citroen onto Revello Drive.

"We just walk in there and say 'hi' to my mom and see what happens," Buffy replied staring out ahead toward her house as they approached. Her eyes were alive with contained violence. Xander could only recall seeing that look on only a few occasions, and each time spelling trouble for any demon in the area.

"Do you see anything?" he asked.

"No. Still looks as empty as ever."

They were referring to the house next door that was still without a resident ever since the body of Mrs. Kalish, the previous owner, had been found. Or what had been left of it. Even after over a year, no one wanted to live there. The irony was not lost on Xander, that the demon that had killed her was the man-of-bugs from the Order of Taraka that had nearly gotten him and Cordelia when they had come here looking for Buffy. Now it was likely that more Taraka creeps were holed up there staking out the Summers residence again.

Pain flashed briefly through his heart at the thought of Cordelia. It was funny how you never realized what you had, something right in front of you, until it is taken away. But he couldn't let himself think about that right now. It had been over a month since they had broken up and he wasn't going to kid himself anymore that the chances of him and Cordy getting back together were well acquainted with none.

He forced himself to focus on their current problem, right now.

He parked the car along the curb in front of her house. Xander got out first and hurried to the passenger side, just as Buffy was swinging her legs out of the car. She was still moving slowly, but her mobility was steadily returning. But he could tell that the pain was not bothering her as much as it had been. Adrenaline and a loved one in danger could help you forget. She let him have her arm as he helped her out of the car and escorted her up the walkway to the porch.

Buffy brought her free hand to her head and rubbed her temple with

her fingers, as if fighting a headache, but she was looking at the other house from the corner of her eyes. Xander kept his eyes pointed toward the Summers house.

"See anything?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Something moved in the side window."

"Make out what it was?"

"I'll take a wild guess and say `something evil.'"

"Safe bet. Any idea how many?"

"Just saw one."

"But they're on a seek and capture mission, this time. I think even they know it'll take more than one to take a Slayer alive."

"Not if they see me like this."

They made it up the steps to the porch without incident, though he doubted even the Order of Taraka would try to jump them in the front lawn in plain daylight. Then he quickly rescinded that, remembering the assassin chick posing as a cop during career week who tried to gun Buffy down during school hours. Buffy unlocked the door and they entered, locking it again behind them.

"Buffy?" they heard a voice coming from deep in the house.

"Mom," Buffy called.

Joyce Summers came from the kitchen. "Buffy, where have you been? I knew you were going to be out all n--" She was stopped by the shock that went through her as she entered the foyer from the dining room and saw her daughter.

"Mom--," Buffy said, trying to stay a panic attack from her mother. It didn't work.

"My, God, Buffy! Are you okay?" She hurried to her girl and put a hand on her cheek, gaping at the bruises on her face, the cut above her right brow. If this was how she reacted when Buffy looked like this, Xander figured she would have really wiggled if she had seen how she looked this morning.

When she had first found out about her daughter being the Slayer, Mrs. Summers had taken the news not very well at all. In fact, she had accepted it not without a lot of stress and misery. And matters had not been helped when Buffy had ran away the following day, not to be heard from for months, until she had returned after the summer ended. Xander had once joked with Willow that Buffy must have come back because she didn't want to miss the new "Must See TV" line-up. Needless to say, his best friend had not found it funny. Neither had Xander.

"Mom, I'm okay. But right now I need--"

"Buffy, what happened to you?" Joyce demanded. "Was it a monster? Oh, of course it was! Did it almost kill you?"

"No, Mom, I'm fine, I swear!" Buffy put her hands on her mother's arms, trying to calm her down. "I just had a rough night at the office. But Faith was there and she helped me out."

"Is Faith all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, she's fine."

"Does she look as bad as you do?"

"Well," Buffy stumbled over the words. "Last night wasn't exactly, uh, a picnic for her either. She had to handle a lot of stuff, also, uh, too. And she looked really--" Buffy saw the expression on her mother's face. "--tired?" Joyce's gaze became a glare. "Really, she had these bloodshot eyes, they looked totally gross." She glanced at Xander.

"It was very scary," he chipped in. "Frightening."

"Buffy," she said, sternly.

"Mom," the Slayer let her shoulders sag. "You know what I do can get dangerous. I know you worry and--"

Joyce raised a hand to stop her. She let out a breath. "I know. You're a Slayer and there are job hazards that I must accept. I understand this, but that does not mean I am ever going to hate your job any less." It seemed as if tears were about to fill her eyes as she looked at her daughter. "It's just seeing you like this is a cruel bucket of cold water." She shook her head, then wrapped her arms around Buffy.

Xander was in position to see the look of pain that filled Buffy's face as her mother held her tightly, but she managed to keep from making any sounds that would alarm her. When Joyce finally pulled away, Buffy was wearing a forced smile that somehow looked sincere.

"See? I'm fine," she told her mother.

But Joyce's attention was else where. "What's this," she asked, in an alarmed voice. She placed a hand on Buffy's side, over her stitches, and this time she was unable to stop a sharp gasp of pain from escaping. "My, God. That's it. Buffy, you are going to your room and you are getting into bed. And you are going to tell me everything that happened!"

"Believe me, Mom, there is nothing in the world I want to do more than that, but. . . You know the work I mentioned? It followed me home, this time. Actually, it was already here. Next door, in fact."

"What?" her mother asked. She took a moment letting it sink in. "You mean there are monsters in that house right now?"

Buffy nodded. "And now that I'm home, they'll be coming over here."

"Why? Are they trying to kill you?" she demanded.

"No. They're after me and Faith. They're trying to capture us. I don't have time to explain. I need you to go with Xander upstairs. Get some of your things together. We're getting you out of here."

"What?" Joyce looked her daughter up and down. "You expect to be able to fight them like this? Alone?"

"I'm still good for a few more rounds." When it looked like her mother was going to argue more, she quickly added. "You're just going to have to trust me, Mom. Please. You may hate my job, but I know how to do it."

Maybe it was the look in Buffy's eyes, Xander thought, but Joyce gave up any other objections and nodded. She put a hand on her daughter's cheek again. "Be careful."

"I will."

Joyce headed up the stairs and Xander moved to follow. Buffy grabbed his arm and he looked into her worried eyes. "Take care of her, Xander."

Her friend put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "I won't let you down, Buff." She gave him a smile and he disappeared upstairs.

Buffy turned and looked at the house around her, the silence descending like a cloak. "Okay. I'm waiting."

* *

Anyone looking into the backyard of the Summers house would have seen what looked like a man, eyes hidden behind sunglasses, sneaking stealthily to the backdoor. He was about six feet tall, clean cut brown hair, a couple of days worth of facial hair, and wearing a long dark trench coat. Despite his heavy work boots, they only made faint thuds as he stepped to the porch and stood in front of the door. He brought his hands to the doorknob and, a few seconds later, opened the door with the slightest clicking noise.

Just as silently, he crept into the kitchen, his movements having a liquid quality not characteristic of normal people with two legs. He reached the doorway and saw Buffy at the end of the hall, by the stairs, standing before the front door. Her back to him.

Seeming to float, he glided slowly down the hall, his coat tails flowing like a cape. The Slayer had her attention focused on the door and did not appear to be aware of his presence.

He was only a few feet from her when she casually turned around to face him, arms folded across her chest. She appraised him without surprise.

"What kept you?" she asked.

The man was slightly taken aback by the target's attitude, but did not lose focus of his objective, and was preparing to strike when a voice replied *behind* him!

"I ran into a pitbull on the way."

The intruder whirled around and found himself facing the second target! Who they had not seen enter the house. But before he could fully contemplate the trap he had just walked into, Faith's stepping side kick was slamming him in the chest and he nearly flew down the hall. Straight for the first Slayer.

Buffy immediately sprang into action with her own strike, a front kick to the intruder's back, and was met with severe protest from her still healing body. Though her strength was not quite back to normal standards, she was still able to send him back up the hallway where Faith was waiting, swinging the handle of Lagos' battle ax, in her hands, across his face. He slammed against the wall and slid to the floor. Faith moved in, raising the deadly ax, to finish him off, when the front door crashed in.

Buffy looked over her shoulder and saw another man in dark clothes center his eyes on her, and they flared with a yellow glow that resembled torches. Smoke was even spiraling from them.

"Buffy!" Faith shouted behind her.

She turned just in time to catch the Lagos Ax the brunette had tossed to her, as the second intruder charged her from behind. Spinning to meet her attacker, he was unable to defend himself as his momentum carried him straight into the ax and the cruel blade sank deeply into his chest. Buffy swung the handle around, therefore, the assassin as well, and slammed him against the wall. She released her hold and the inhuman slid to the floor, the yellow fire in its eyes dying as he did.

"Buffy!" she heard a frantic shout from upstairs.

"No, Mom! Stay up there!" she shouted, turning her attention to the first intruder.

Faith was still standing over him and had pulled out a knife. But before she could take him out, he swung his arm up at the younger Slayer and swatted her away.

Buffy blinked. The intruder's arm had become a thick tentacle that shot out of the sleeve of his coat and had sent Faith flying back into the kitchen. Buffy quickly composed herself and moved in. Only to get slammed by the tentacle, too. She hit the wall and every single injury screamed at once. Her vision cleared in time for her to see the tentacle coming straight at her face. She just let herself drop feeling the appendage miss her hair as she hit the floor.

She scrambled on all fours and came to the dead demon lying along the wall. Buffy grabbed for the Lagos Ax but was swatted by the tentacle again, sent sliding across the floor where she stopped in front of the open door. She was about to push herself up when the tentacle shot out at her again, this time wrapping itself around her neck and yanking her to her knees. The inhuman, whose sunglasses had been lost during the fighting, stepped out of the hallway, and Buffy saw the tentacle reeling into the sleeve as he approached her. It stood over her and she could see its eyes clearly. They were solid pools of black. It grabbed the lapel of her jacket with its still human hand,

and Buffy would have been curious how much of this guy was octopus like if he hadn't been currently trying to choke the life out of her. But it probably still wanted to take her alive and was just trying to cause her to black out.

That bought her some time, she thought. But time to do what?

From her position, she was just able to see around the guy, moving her eyes only, and saw Faith in the doorway to the kitchen holding a butcher knife. The brunette looked on them and quickly flipped the knife in her hand. Throwing it by the blade, it whistled down the hall straight for the Tarakan's back.

Where it bounced off with a clank.

A hard shell, Buffy thought. She saw Faith stand there in amazement. But just for a second and she spotted the knife she had lost in the hallway and made a dive for it. Snatching it up, she sent it sliding down the floor towards them. But tentacle boy heard the scraping sound it made against the wood and looked down just in time to see the knife appear between its feet. Buffy made a grab for it.

The creature roared in anger and pulled the Slayer off the floor to keep her away from the weapon. But his roar was cut off when Buffy slammed the knife into its throat all the way to the hilt.

Its hold went slack and Buffy fell from the tentacle and collapsed under her own weight to the floor, coughing for breath. With a final gurgle, the creature died on its feet and started to fall towards her. Buffy tucked herself in a ball for the impact but Faith rushed up and shoved the dead thing to the side where it fell into the foyer.

Faith looked down at the blonde Slayer and smiled. "Now that is how slaying is done," she declared, reaching a hand down to her.

Clearing her throat, Buffy accepted the help to her feet. "How many is that I owe you now?"

"C'mon, B, I'm not the type of person to keep track of these things." Buffy narrowed her eyebrows at her. "I let Giles do it." Buffy rolled her eyes as if to say `of course.'

"Buffy!" The Slayers turned and saw a harried Joyce Summers rushing down the stairs. Xander, who had been unable to keep her up there any longer, was right behind her.

"It's okay, Mom," Buffy called. "I think it's over."

As soon as her mother reached the bottom she threw her arms around her daughter. "Oh, God, I was so worried! Are you all right? When I heard the noise."

During the exchange, Faith fidgeted with the pouch hanging from her neck, sniffed it and made a face. She let it drop and shoved her hands into the pockets of her sweat shirt.

"Oh, my," Joyce said, as she finally noticed the dead demon lying on the floor. Then she saw Faith standing next to her. "Faith! Where did

you come from?"

"I was dropped off one street over."

"It was a trap we had set up," Buffy said.

"Yeah," Faith smiled. "These creeps snuck up on you guys, while I snuck up on them."

"Looks like it worked pretty good," Xander commented.

"Them?" Joyce asked. "There're more?" She looked around and spotted the mess in the hallway. "Eeww."

Xander and the Slayers looked to see that the other demon had disintegrated into a liquefied bubbling goo. The ax of Lagos lying in the puddle. "That was mighty convenient of him. Makes cleaning up easier. All you need is a mop."

"What about. . .?" Joyce indicated the other creature.

"Faith and I will clean up our mess when this is all over," Buffy assured her.

"I'm not worried about that. I'm just glad you weren't hurt. Either of you," she added, looking at Faith. Then, to the younger Slayer's surprise, embraced her in a hug. "Thank you, Faith, for being here."

Taken off guard, she wasn't able to say anything for a moment. She found her voice when Joyce pulled away. "Hey, nothing but the best for B's mom. You deserve both Slayers."

"I appreciate it." She looked the young girl up and down. "You look great." She looked pointedly at her daughter. "Wouldn't you say, Buffy?"

Buffy seemed chided. "Uh, yeah. Sure."

"What's going on?" asked Faith.

"Buffy's grounded for almost dying, last night," Xander told her.

"What?" Buffy exclaimed. "What did you two talk about up there?"

"I was just filling your mom in on what's been happening lately." Buffy shot daggers at him with her eyes. "Oh, she didn't ask for the gruesome details so it was pretty much a short story."

"Great," Buffy threw her hands in the air, and winced in pain. "Don't I even get a suspended sentence for extenuating circumstances?"

"Well, we'll discuss this later, honey."

"Yeah, we still need to hit the road," Xander said. He was carrying a shoulder bag which obviously had her mother's things.

"Yeah, the sun will be down in a few hours," Buffy agreed. "And I

don't like leaving Willow and Giles alone at the library. Even with Angel there, he can't move that much until the sun goes down. We better hurry."

Buffy led the way out of the house and Faith brought up the rear, closing the front door behind them.

End of Part Eleven

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Twelve

CHAPTER TWELVE

Buffy, Faith, and Xander walked through the library doors and found Willow and Giles conferring with each other on the upper level. Buffy was relieved when she saw that they were okay. She had feared that they would be attacked while she and Faith had been away. Once they had gotten her mother to a motel, she had called Giles to let them know everything went, more or less, according to plan, and was happy to hear his and Willow's research had not been interrupted by any surprise visitors. And it turned out the Tarakans didn't have the school under surveillance after all. The Slayers had made a quick sweep of the campus just to verify that there were no demons lurking in the bushes or connecting buildings.

As they passed the check-out counter Angel appeared in the office doorway.

"Angel," Buffy said, feeling a smile on her face. She went to him and hugged him.

"Are you guys all right?" he asked.

"Yeah, we're fine."

"Giles told me about your plan. Did you run into any trouble?"

"Scratch two more Taraka uglies," Xander chimed in.

"You got your mother out of there?"

"Yeah, she's fine. Holed up in a motel outside of town. She should be safe for a while."

"By then, this should all be over," Faith spoke up.

"Let's hope so," Xander added.

Buffy pulled away from Angel and he looked at her closely. "You're sure you're all right?" There was concern in his voice.

"Yes," she said, firmly but she was still smiling. "I caught a few bumps but with Mom safe, I feel much better, now."

Willow and Giles were coming down the steps and heading towards them.

"Find anything new?" she asked them.

"Some," Giles said, looking at her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Buffy said, with a sigh. "And I wish everyone would stop asking me that. I'm good."

"Yeah," Faith said. "She bagged both the demons herself."

"I couldn't have done it without you, though."

"Either way, they're on your score card."

"I don't keep track of that sort of thing."

"Don't worry. I'll do it for you," Faith said with a smile.

Buffy gave her a "what am I gonna do with you?" expression, then turned to Giles and Willow. "So, what did you find?"

"Oh, yes," Giles began. He had removed his tweed jacket hours ago and Buffy noticed his haggard appearance for the first time. Out of all of them, he was the only one who still had not gotten any sleep. And after the night they just went through, she wasn't sure just how much longer her Watcher could go on like this. She made a mental note to send him to his office for a nap as soon as he made his report. She listened as he continued.

"We've found several volumes with chronicles of a demon that was undoubtedly Oranstine. Some of them, however, are conflicting."

"How do they conflict?" Buffy asked.

"Well, some of Oranstine's exploits occur very close in the same time frame," Willow said.

"Which would suggest that there are more shapeshifting demons than just Oranstine," Giles finished.

"Great, that's just what the world needs," Xander said. "More demons who can disguise themselves to be anything."

"Relax, Xander," Buffy said. "It's not really all that different from other demons who could take on a human form. Remember Marc in the talent show our sophomore year?"

"Yeah, but he only had one disguise," Xander countered.

"Ooo," Faith said. "I haven't heard this one before. What happened?"

"Marc turned out to be a demon that needed a few human organs to keep his human form for another seven years," Willow began. "And when we finally found out who it was all the demon needed was a brain. Marc was about to slice the top of Giles' head off with a guillotine; that was his act for the talent show, when Buffy and--"

"Uh, Willow," Buffy said.

"What? Oh. Sorry." She looked at Faith. "I'll tell you the rest later."

"Can't wait."

"So, Oranstine. . ." Xander prompted.

"Oh," Giles continued. "We found out that Oranstine's power center appears to be a tattoo, the exact design on Faith's arm." The brunette Slayer unzipped her sweat shirt and slipped out of the left sleeve, exposing the tattoo. "Reports are a bit sketchy, but it seems to be located on the demon's chest. It's not known where it got the tattoo nor where the power behind the tattoo is derived from, but by casting it on others, it can share a part of its power, its essence, so to speak."

"You mean a part of that demon is in me?" Faith demanded.

"Some of its power, yes," Giles said.

"How do we get rid of it?" Buffy could tell Faith was fighting to keep the worry from her voice.

"From what we found," Giles hesitated. "Once the tattoo has been placed, it can never be removed." Giles held up his hand when he saw that Faith was about to speak. "But my guess is that if Oranstine were to die, then the power behind the tattoo would negate itself."

"But you're not sure?" Buffy asked.

"I'm afraid I haven't found anything to confirm that hypothesis."

"Hey, it works for me." Faith said. "I'd be willing to test out that theory. Even if it won't come off when I kill it, at least it won't have any power."

"Perhaps," Giles said. He looked at his younger Slayer with concern. "But then Oranstine's death may take you with it."

Faith and the others didn't say anything for several seconds. She glanced at them and saw they were all looking at her. Finally, she shrugged. "Hey, no biggie. Slayers like to live dangerously, right, B?"

Buffy managed to give her a supporting grin. "Yeah. I'm sure nothing will happen when we take Oran out. And besides, Willow's protection spell blocks out her power over you."

"The spell may neutralize the demon's hold on Faith, but it cannot remove it," Giles said. "With Oranstine dead, there's no telling what may happen."

"And how do we know that this thing is actually working?" Faith held up the pouch hanging from her neck.

"Well, the magic is in place," Willow said. "That much I'm sure of, but there is a way to test it." She glanced at Giles.

The Watcher removed his glasses. "Willow and I also believe we've discovered why this Slayer Vampire appears to be impervious. The

tattoo which lends Oranstone's influence also binds the bearer of its mark to the demon itself. As long as Oranstone is alive, no one with its mark can be killed."

Silence fell as the words sank in. Buffy regarded her fellow Slayer. Faith had only been a Slayer for just over half a year, since just before last summer, being activated at the moment Kendra was killed, she reflected. Even though the time was considered short, she did go through a lot during that period. Most notable being the loss of her first Watcher at the hands of the master vampire Kakistos, causing her to flee Boston to Sunnydale, seeking Buffy's help. That much the two Slayers had in common, and that their second Watcher happened to be the same person. But Buffy could see very little of herself in this new Slayer. Where as Buffy tried to deny her calling as the Slayer; not just when Merrick had first approached her, but also when she met Giles here in this very library on her first day of school, Faith committed herself --no, Buffy amended-- practically threw herself into her role as the Slayer. She had a zeal that Buffy never had, which, she was slightly embarrassed to admit, made her a bit jealous at the time.

She recalled how protective of her title she had been when Kendra had come along claiming to be the Slayer. But she had quickly come to accept the concept of two Slayers, thinking it would be sort of nice to have somebody cover for her while she could take some time off, as Giles had suggested when they had the discussion of her going to college. On days like this, college was looking a lot better. Wait until Faith has had about a hundred more days like this, she thought. But then, she had to survive today. They both had to. But so far Faith appeared to be holding up pretty well.

Buffy finally broke the silence. "You said there was a way to test it?"

"Yes." Willow looked uncertain. "See, if Faith is indestructible, uh, then she should be able to. . ."

"I get it," Faith said. She took the sweat shirt off and pulled out a stake from the back of her waistband. Even though it had been unlikely they would be facing vampires at Buffy's house, during the day, she wouldn't want to be caught without one.

Realizing what she was going to do, Buffy said, "Wait!"

But Faith was already putting the sharp wooden point against her open palm and made a quick slash across her skin. She hardly winced as blood welled up and started to drip onto the floor.

"Oh, dear," Giles whispered. But nobody said anything else as they stood and watched the blood dripping from her hand.

Faith looked down at the pouch resting on her chest. She grabbed it with her other hand and pulled it over her head. Willow reached out and took it from her. As soon as the pouch left her hand, Faith's cut suddenly stopped bleeding and they all stood in awe as it began to mend itself. After almost a minute the wound was completely gone, as if never there. She wiped the blood away with her other hand and there wasn't even a faint scar left. She looked at the knuckles of her hand and remembered how badly she had scraped them last night, punching the rock surface of the wall. She hadn't noticed how fast

they had healed. And it also explained why she had not drowned during her underwater escape from the caves.

She just looked at her hand for a long moment before closing it into a fist. She said, "I don't know whether to think this is very cool or to be more worried."

"Being indestructible can have its advantages," Xander spoke up.

"But not without a cost," Angel said. "Without the protection spell you cannot be killed, but then you'll be at Oran's mercy."

"Not a very fair trade," Buffy said.

"Here Faith." Willow held the pouch out to the Slayer. Faith eyed it for a few seconds then accepted it and hung it around her neck once more.

Faith was looking a bit pale to Buffy. A total contrast to the headstrong Slayer she resembled just a couple of minutes ago. But the blonde Slayer was sure that Faith would be able to hold herself together. She was very tough, yet she was still dealing with the fact that she had died last night. Or maybe she wasn't dealing with it, she thought, remembering how Faith was insisting that Oranstone had faked her death to activate the Slayer Vampire. Maybe she denied the fact that she had died because she did not want to face that horrible truth. Heaven knew, as did everyone else in this library, that Buffy had not easily come to terms with her own brief death, at the hands of the Master. Not until she had turned his remaining bones to dust with a sledgehammer. And now Faith was faced with the possibility of dying with Oranstone.

How things had suddenly switched, Buffy thought. Before they had left the library to go get her mom, Giles had been adamant with Faith that she needed to watch over Buffy, make sure no further harm came to her. The older Slayer had declared that she wasn't a baby, but her Watcher would hear none of her protests and even had Faith promise that nothing would happen to Buffy.

"I'll play baby-sitter," the brunette had replied with a grin, causing Buffy to glare at her.

And then a similar scene had played out in her Mom's motel room. Joyce had taken Faith aside to talk to her as Buffy and Xander had returned to the Citroen. When she had an idea, she had been on her way back to the room to tell them about it, when her mother's voice made her stop just outside the door where she listened to the conversation.

"Don't worry Mrs. S, Buffy's tough," Faith was saying. "She can handle this."

"But in her condition," her mother replied. "She's just not as strong as you are, right now. It just has me worried."

"Trust me," Faith said. "By the time the sun goes down, she'll be almost good as new, and ready to kick major as-- uh, demon butt. Back at the house, those two guys were really tough and we took care of them like that."

Buffy heard Faith snap her fingers. She was leaning against the wall as she listened, her expression solemn. A moment of silence followed, then Joyce Summers spoke again.

"Can you look after her for me, Faith?"

After a brief pause, Faith replied, in a bravado tone, "Hey, no problem. I'll play baby-sitter."

Buffy rolled her eyes at that. Then, gathering a false front of her own, she walked into the room saying, "Hey, I just had an idea." The other two women looked at her, and she noticed her mother hiding her worried expression, but Buffy pretended not to notice. "Mom, can we borrow the jeep?"

"The jeep?" she asked. "To go out slaying?"

"Yeah. I mean, no. We're not going to slay anything with the jeep. The car will be fine, we'll make sure it stays out of any fights."

"Buffy," Joyce said. "You remember what happened last time when I let you borrow the car. And that time I was under the influence of a curse."

"A curse? How did that happen?" Faith asked.

"Oh, that's a long story. I'll tell you about it later," Buffy said.

"I ate cursed candy," Joyce told Faith.

Buffy let her shoulders drop. "Apparently not that long." She took a deep breath. "So how `bout it, Mom? It would really help us out."

"Okay." Joyce picked up her purse from the bed and took her keys out. Buffy took a step forward, but her mother turned to Faith. "Do you know how to drive, Faith?"

"I've had occasion to drive a few cars," she said, giving Buffy a knowing look.

"So you have a license?"

Faith said, truthfully, "I don't have a California license."

Her mother decided not to press the issue and handed the brunette her keys. Buffy mumbled, "Oh, really feeling the confidence in this room, it's almost embarrassing."

"Buffy," her mother said, approaching her. "I just don't think you should be driving in your condition, that's all."

"`My condition.' Mom, I'm not pregnant! And pregnant women do drive."

"You know what I mean. You're still weak."

"I was strong enough to kill two demons an hour ago," she commented.

"Stop," her mother said, in a serious tone. "I just want you to be careful, all right?"

Buffy looked at her mom. "I know. And I will be. I promise."

Joyce hugged her and held her tightly for a long time. This time, Buffy hardly felt any pain. When she pulled away, she saw faint hints of tears in her eyes.

"We better go," Faith said, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, I better go with Xander. He shouldn't be without a Slayer escort." She looked at her mother.

Joyce nodded to her daughter that she was all right and started to follow Faith out of the room. "Faith?" she said.

The brunette looked at her and Buffy saw them share a silent communication, which she pretended not to know what it was about. "I will," Faith said. "Don't worry."

"Be careful," she said again.

"We will," Buffy said, and the two Slayers left.

Now, back at the library, Buffy felt like she was the one that needed to look after Faith. Even though there was no way she could have beaten her in an arm-wrestling match just now.

"Don't worry, Faith," she finally said. "We'll figure something out."

Faith looked at her. There was rage suddenly in her eyes. "Oh, I'm not worried. I'm gonna kill that demon bitch myself." She grabbed her sweat shirt from the counter, where she had put it, and slipped it on as she crossed over to the book cage, heading straight for the weapons cabinet. Everyone watched the younger Slayer with concern, even Angel.

Buffy looked to Giles. Her Watcher took his cue and followed the brunette. "Faith. Now, we must not lose our heads here. We need to maintain our focus."

Faith had pulled out another battle ax, this one not as big as Lagos' ax, but it would do for her. Then she dove in for more weapons. "Yeah, while you all are staying focused, I'm gonna go out there and kill me a demon, and hopefully I'll find our fellow Slayer with her."

"Faith," Giles said, firmly. "You cannot go out there alone. We need to stay together on this. Our only hope is to combine our forces against these odds." But the Slayer was not paying him any attention as she pulled out a crossbow, slinging it over her shoulder. "Faith. I'm not going to let you go out there by yourself, it's suicide."

She looked at him. "Back off, Giles. You can't stop me." She returned

her attention back to the weapons.

Giles looked over his shoulder to the others, who watched silently. Buffy started to walk forward, but he raised his hand to stop her. She gave him a questioning look and he gave her a reassuring nod. She rejoined the others.

He turned to his younger Slayer again. When he spoke, his voice was soft and without authority. "Faith, I know exactly how you feel."

The brunette scoffed at him, pulling out a wicked looking machete. Buffy felt the urge to slap her for that, as she began to realize where Giles was going with this. But she told herself that Faith was not exactly thinking clearly right now. Hell, she thought, Faith usually didn't act rationally most of the time.

"Unless you feel like killing that demon as much as I do, then there's no way you can know what I'm feeling!"

Faith slammed the cabinet shut again and turned to leave the cage. She stopped when she saw Giles rolling up the sleeve of his left arm. Her determination to leave was still there, but she was curious. Giles had the sleeve rolled up above his elbow and presented the inside of his arm to the Slayer. Buffy knew Faith was looking at the weird tattoo the Watcher had near the inside of his elbow.

"What's that?" she asked.

"This is the Mark of Eyghon," he said, meeting her eyes. "Eyghon is *my* demon."

Faith looked at him for a long moment. Then she asked, "Is this demon still around?"

"No. It's gone, I assure you. But I never would have made it through without the help of some good friends." He glanced over his shoulder once more at the group by the counter. His attention on Faith again, he said, "I would like to tell you about it."

Faith didn't say anything for a moment. Giles whispered, "We can't do this without you, Faith."

Faith's eyes wandered around the library, then she looked at the weapons she was holding. Silently, she set them down. Giles took the crossbow and she slipped out of the sling.

"We can talk in my office."

She still said nothing as she walked with him across the library. Giles handed the crossbow to Buffy when they reached the group, Faith stepping inside the office. "The rest of you continue. . ."

"Got it," she said. "Oranstone, tattoo, Slayer Vampire."

"Yes. And Willow, get on the computer and check the hospital and the police station. Buffy was rather rough with the two chaps at Faith's motel last night, perhaps they were unable to avoid being taken into custody."

"If they're at the police station, then I wasn't rough enough with them," the blonde Slayer commented.

"Sure," Willow said. "But it might be best to try the newspaper first, considering that hacking into the police and hospital databases is kinda illegal."

"Oh, yes, quite right. Let's do try to be within the law. To start with, anyway." With that he stepped into his office and closed the door behind him.

But they all just stood there for a moment, not moving to their tasks.

"Wow," Buffy said, shaking her head.

"What?" Angel asked.

"Giles often said I still surprise him every once in a while." She glanced at the closed door and smiled. "But he can still surprise me, too."

End of Part Twelve

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Thirteen

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

With sunset less than an hour away, Angel had more freedom to move around the library, with the deepening of the shadows, and for the past two hours they had been hard at work gathering as much information as they could. Giles was sure that Oranstine would make her move once night fell, to take full advantage of her vampire ranks, and they were still no closer to finding a sure way of killing the Slayer Vampire. So far, the only plan they could come up with was they would have to kill Oranstine first. And with the chance that the demon's demise could possibly mean Faith's death, they were deep in their research to find a way to sever her hold on the younger Slayer.

They had not found anything yet.

He remembered what Giles had said this morning about not going after the demon, especially with Buffy not up to full strength, but with the new development with Faith and her bond with Oran he was convinced that they couldn't afford to wait for her to make the first move. They needed to take the fight to her.

Angel was on the upper level, standing in the shadows between the bookshelves, as he looked through the endless volumes there. It was also a way to guard the doors leading into the Stacks, which was the larger area of the library. He glanced down toward the book cage where Faith was busy preparing the weapons they would need for tonight, lining them atop the table. She was definitely not one well suited for doing research, he reflected, considering the pressure she must be feeling right now. True, they were all under pressure, but she was at the heart of it, and Angel had to admit she was certainly up to the challenge to face it. Her weakness would be her impulsiveness, leaping into action without first thinking of the consequences. Faith was fortunate to have Giles as her Watcher, and

the vampire had been very impressed how the man was able to calm his Slayer down. Lord knew he'd had plenty of practice with Buffy over the past two years.

His eyes fell on the blonde Slayer. She was sitting at the table below him, looking through another old book, Xander right across from her. What area of the surface that was not occupied with weapons was cluttered with volumes of dusty tomes. Buffy was slowly rotating her neck as she read, wincing slightly from her still soar muscles. Nearly all the bruises had faded completely, but the cut above her right brow was still there. Willow had checked her stitches and had found they had been pulled, during the fight with the demons at her house, but the wound in her side had already closed, so she removed them.

Angel still felt it was a bad idea for her to face the Slayer Vampire again. Even with hers and Faith's combined strengths, it would be extremely dangerous for them both. Angel had insisted that he should be with them. Three to one odds would be better, but the Slayers also had Oranstone to contend with, if they were to even have a chance of defeating the indestructible vampire. And they could not do that with its minions around to protect it. Faith and Buffy would try to take out as many lesser demons as they could, but it was agreed that their focus would be Oran and the Slayer Vampire. So Giles, Xander, and Willow had to keep the others occupied, and the only hope they had of doing that without dying was with his help.

"Aha!" Willow declared. She was behind the counter working on the computer. Everyone turned their attention to her. Giles stepped out of his office. "I think I found one of Buffy's attackers."

"I believe they are my victims, thank you very much," Buffy said as she walked over to the counter.

"What did you find?" asked Giles.

"According to the police files there was a man, identified only as 'John Smith,' who was arrested this morning and booked for possession of concealed weapons." The teenager looked up. "He's still there awaiting bail."

"Good show, Willow." Giles pulled a fresh tweed jacket from the hanger rack. "You and I should go down there immediately. We don't want him to leave before we get there."

Everyone was gathered around the counter again. "Are you sure it's safe for you two to go after this guy by yourself?" Buffy asked.

"We should be safe enough," Giles reassured her. "If all goes according to plan, he won't even see us. And I want the rest of you to leave the library as soon as the sun goes down."

"You think they'll attack us here?"

"It's best not to take that chance." He came out from behind the counter, followed by Willow and set his leather bag on the table to choose a couple of weapons. "With any luck, this chap will lead us to the exact location of their hideout."

"You don't think they'll stay in their cave hideout?" asked Faith.

Xander spoke up. "If you knew that two pissed-off Slayers had your address wouldn't you feel the need to move?"

"And I'd rather not go puttering around searching blindly where they're likely to see us coming before we find them. We'll call if we find anything."

"But we're going to have to be by a phone where you can reach us," Buffy said. "I don't think our usual places will be ideal choices. And we have to assume Oran knows where everyone lives."

"How `bout the Bronze?" Xander suggested. "I know the Order of Taraka don't shy away from public assassinations, but they may think twice about trying to kidnap two Slayers at the same time in a very crowded place."

"The Bronze, on a Saturday night?" Willow said. "We're talking long waiting line. What if you can't get in?"

"I don't think that'll be a problem." Buffy turned to Angel. "Right, Angel?"

He nodded. "I can sneak in and let everyone in through the back."

"Don't they have a large bouncer guarding the back?" Xander asked.

The vampire, Faith, and Buffy looked at him and said, "What's your point?"

Xander looked at them for a moment. "Oh. Well, adding assault and battery to Willow's hacking offense shouldn't really make too much of a difference on our arrest warrants."

"Not to worry," Buffy told him. "They'll be no batteries included." She looked at Angel.

"He won't even have a bruise when he wakes up," he promised her.

* * * *

Willow was sitting in the passenger seat of the Citroen, fidgeting with a handheld cross. She also had a couple of wooden stakes in the pockets of her overalls, but she thought it wouldn't be a good idea to play with those, considering where she was. The Sunnydale Police Station was pretty small compared to most city precincts; at least the ones she saw on TV, but it still marveled the redhead how all the vampires and demons can go unnoticed for so long in such a small town.

The sun had gone down just before their arrival and it had been almost twenty minutes since Giles had entered the station. Willow figured she would give the librarian a couple of more minutes before she started to worry. After all, she thought, what could possibly happen to him in a police station?

Willow decided to forego the two minutes.

Giles may be just the Watcher, but he was more capable than she and the others gave him credit for sometimes. She had seen him slay a few vampires during his time as Buffy's Watcher and she wondered if he had faced any vampires prior to coming to the Hellmouth? From what little she heard him say about Watchers, they usually tend to stay away from vampires and other monsters, except in extreme emergencies. Such as when Noriko's Watcher, Wallace, had saved her. They still did not know what happened to that Watcher. Surely he would not have stood by and allowed his charge to be taken. And if the Order of Taraka had done the kidnapping, more than likely Wallace was dead.

For ten years he had been Noriko's Watcher, and she had never been activated as a Slayer under his care. He must have developed some type of bond with the young girl during all that time. Willow knew that Giles cared about Buffy, not just as his Slayer, but as the girl who was, in many ways, the daughter he never had. His reaction to Buffy's running away last year had been similar to Mrs. Summers', although without being as emotionally expressive about it. She and Xander had to watch as he would often rush off to catch a plane, after receiving a possible sighting on Buffy, seeing the hope in his eyes as he left. Then to see the helplessness in them when he returned. But he remained strong, at least that's the appearance he showed them. She remembered that night when they had gone to his apartment and he had opened his door to find Buffy standing in front of him. It must've taken him every drop of self-control to keep from throwing his arms around her, and thoroughly embarrassing her in front of her friends, but Willow had seen the light return to his eyes that had been missing for those months.

And then there was Faith. She was sure that Giles cared for Faith also, but not with the love he felt for Buffy. Not yet, anyway. But that was just because he had not known Faith as long, and the brunette was more closed off to everybody. Given time Giles would surely come to love the other Slayer as he did Buffy, unless a new Watcher was assigned to her and she was moved from Sunnydale.

Giles was like a single parent with two teenage daughters to look after, she thought. Fate can have a weird sense of humor at times.

Willow was brought out of her thoughts when she saw Giles walk out of the police station. "How did it go?" she asked when he got back behind the wheel.

"I believe it went rather well," he said.

"You don't think he'll be curious about who bailed him out?"

"I suspect, well I hope, he won't want to stay around long enough to ask any questions. Hopefully, he'll just assume one of his colleges bailed him out and just didn't want to wait for him in a police station."

"How much did the bail cost?"

Giles tilted his head. "More than a month's worth of my librarian salary."

"Gosh. I doubt this guy is going to stick around for his court appointment. How can you afford it?"

"Simple. I can't." He looked at the worried expression from the teenager. "Not to worry, I have a receipt. The Council does reimburse for expenses generated during the cause."

"Really?" Willow sounded surprised.

"Oh, yes. Did you think I was left with the responsibility of caring for my Slayers without assistance?"

"Uh, actually, yeah."

Giles smiled. "The Council does provide me with some resources other than books. A slush fund, if you will. Who do you think pays for Faith's motel room? Or all the weapons Buffy has gone through over the years?"

"At least you don't have to pay for all of Buffy's clothes," Willow said, jokingly.

"Not for Buffy. But I leave Faith to do her own shopping."

"Really? You pay for Faith's clothes?"

"Remember, Faith does not have a real home here, and no means of income. She is, after all, a Slayer, so the Council should at least make sure she has everything she needs. Granted, the Watcher's Council isn't exactly swimming in wealth, but nobody said protecting the world was easy."

"I never thought of it that way."

"Hello," Giles said, and Willow looked to where his gaze was. "There's our chap."

Willow saw a tall man in dark fatigues. She hadn't noticed the taxi that pulled up in front of the station. "Are you sure? You said they were wearing ski masks."

"Yes, that's right. But he's still wearing the same clothes from last night." They watched as the man got into the back of the taxi and Giles turned on the engine as it pulled away from the station. "Here we go."

* * * * *

The line of people waiting to get inside the Bronze was very long, so they had to go with Angel's plan. They only waited at the backdoor for just a few minutes before the vampire opened it to allow them in. True to his word, the bouncer on duty there was sleeping soundly without a mark on him. But, still feeling bad for the guy, Buffy insisted they leave their cover charge with him, stuffed in one of his pockets. Not too surprisingly, Faith had volunteered for the stuffing.

Now, after nearly an hour, she, Xander, and Faith had finally snagged a table close to the bar, upgrading from the many sofas away from the

dance floor. Angel had taken position on the second floor where he can keep an overhead view of them and everyone around them. He was sure he would be able to spot any demon or vampire long before they reached them; not that the demon in question would survive its encounter with the two Slayers sitting at the table. The three teens were making small talk, trying to blend in, but they were warily scanning the gyrating crowd on the dance floor and the dozens of people milling throughout the rest of the club.

"So, Buffy," Xander said, picking a new subject, "what do you want for your birthday?"

"Birthday?" Buffy said. "Wow. With all that's been going on lately, I nearly forgot it was coming."

"When is your birthday, B?" Faith asked.

"In two weeks."

"She's gonna be the big one-eight," Xander smiled. "It's gonna be all down hill from there."

"Speaking from experience?" she asked, with mock scorn.

"Absolutely."

"When did you turn eighteen?" Faith asked Xander.

"Just last week. Of course the surprise party they threw for me was nothing compared to the *monster* bashes we try to have for the Buffster, here."

"Don't even go there," Buffy warned with a slight grin.

"A party? Where was I?" Faith said, with a tint of accusation.

"Well, uh, I--I did try to call you," Buffy said. "I even went by your place earlier that day before the party."

"I must've been out." Faith said, impassively. Despite the thrum of rock coming from the sound system, silence fell at the table. The brunette made a show of scanning the club again, looking for any would be demons. So far there was still just Angel, looking down on them. Finally, she said, "So, what's your biggest thrill of turning eighteen, Xand?"

"My biggest thrill, hmmm," Xander put a hand to his chin.

"Legalizing his Playboy collection?" Buffy suggested.

Xander gave her an offended look. "Buffy! Such thoughts! And coming from a *minor*!"

"Hey, you! Keep all verbal assaults above the belt!" Then, after thinking about what she just said, and seeing Faith's and Xander's expressions, she said, "I mean-- I wasn't-- just that. . . ." She let her shoulder's slump. "Oooh. Just when I thought I got over the

ability to embarrass myself, I make a come back."

"Hey guys."

Buffy whirled at the sound of the voice behind her but relaxed when she recognized the eighteen year old. "Oz! Been standing there long?"

"What?" he asked, his eyebrows narrowing slightly.

"Nothing," she quickly said. "I didn't know you were playing tonight."

"Yeah. Neither did I. Devon got a call for an impromptu gig, at the last minute. We'll be on in about twenty minutes."

"Join us," Buffy said.

The guitarist of the local band known as 'Dingoes Ate My Baby' was about as tall as Buffy, if you didn't count his spiked hair style; which was a current shade of red this week. "Thanks."

He slid on the stool next to the blonde Slayer nodding in turn to Faith and Xander, though the exchange between the two young men was a little tense, with Xander averting his eyes quickly. Even though Oz and Willow had made up just a few weeks ago, the 'incident' which led to the break up was still fresh to all those involved. With Oz and Cordelia walking in on Xander and Willow in full smoochie mode, while trying to rescue them where they were being held hostage by Spike, no less.

To Buffy, it seemed as if things were calming down a bit. Well, Cordelia still made an effort to avoid them, but she really couldn't blame her for that. But was it her imagination or was Cordelia actually starting to be just a little less mean to them? It was hard to tell.

"Is Willow here with you guys?" asked Oz.

"No. 'Fraid not." Buffy noticed Oz was staring at her, finally getting a better look at her.

"Buffy, what happened?" Even though the tone of his voice hardly changed, Buffy picked up on his concern.

"Oh, it's a long stor--" She stopped and glanced at Faith and Xander, then said, "I got my ass kicked."

Oz raised his eyebrows. "That was going to be my first guess. But that's something that happens, like, every once in a . . . never."

"Believe me, it's something I do not want to make a common occurrence of."

"So did you bag the demon that did this to you?"

"Not yet," Buffy said, looking down at the table.

"But we're going to get her tonight," Faith spoke up.

"Do you guys think she'll show up here?"

"No. We're waiting for Willow and Giles to give us a call. They're trying to find out where this demon's hideout is."

"They are? Is it dangerous?"

"No," Buffy said, quickly. Oz's concern for Willow was apparent in his usually calm demeanor. "Well, no more than what she has done in the past."

"Do you guys need any help?" he asked.

"What about your gig?" Buffy asked.

"If Willow's in danger, then the band can wait."

Buffy looked to Xander for help, but it seemed as if he wasn't comfortable enough to say anything, and Faith really didn't know Oz very well, so she was more than likely to invite him along to join the slayage. "Oz, Willow wouldn't appreciate it if we dragged you away from your band, she knows how important it is to you."

"If Willow is caught up in something dangerous, I should be with her," Oz said, sternly.

"Oz," Buffy began. It seemed his loyalty to his girlfriend knew no bounds and she respected him for that, and she wasn't intimidated to say that their love for each other could easily rival that of hers and Angel's. Or, at least, the way it used to be. "I promise you, Faith and I are the ones who are going to be handling the really dangerous stuff. If everything goes according to plan the most Willow will have to do is watch us slay alot of demons. And besides, you do have obligations to the guys in the band. They're not the Dingoes without their lead guitarist."

Oz didn't look entirely convinced. "But it can never hurt to have an extra pair of hands to hold stakes. Granted I haven't been in the slaying business as long as you guys, but I still have contributed in the past."

"But you shouldn't have to let vampires interfere with your life. Believe me, I know how important keeping some semblance of a normal life can be."

Oz seemed to consider this. Torn between his concern for Willow and his duty to the band, which was really the only ambition the laid back teen had in life. Other than spending as much time with a certain redhead that was legally possible. And there have been many times where he had missed out on similar adventures.

Oz's attention was drawn away from the table and Buffy looked over her shoulder to see the lead singer of Dingoes waving him over, where the band had begun to set up for tonight's gig. Oz gave the tall young man a nod and indicated he would be right there. He turned his attention back to Buffy.

"Look, I'll make you a deal," she said. "I will give you my personal guarantee; and this is a Slayer-approved, money-back guarantee, that

Willow will be perfectly fine after tonight's slaying. And I'll even have her give you a call as soon as this is all over." She paused, hoping that didn't sound as lame as she thought it did. "Deal?"

Oz regarded her for a moment. Then said, "You have it in writing?"

"In triplicate," she nodded.

Even though it seemed she sold him on the idea, Buffy was not sure if he really would agree to stay. She knew that if someone she cared for was doing something dangerous she wouldn't be able to just sit back. Then why was she doing her best to keep Oz here? she thought. Simple --well, okay, maybe not so simple-- but Oz was a friend and the fact that Willow loved him so much made it imperative for her to do what she could to make sure he didn't ruin things with his struggling band. He was already forced to take three days off away from the band due to his little curse of becoming a werewolf on the nights of the full moon every single month, which already put a strain on them. It wouldn't do him any good to abandon them just minutes before an act to go out and fight vampires. Sure, Buffy often had to run off for that exact reason, but that was the package deal of being the Chosen One, or One of the Two, she thought.

But before Oz could reply, Xander spoke up. "Buff." He pointed toward the bar where one of the bartenders was holding a phone, covering the mouthpiece with his hand.

"I have a phone call for an Anne," he said in a raised voice that was barely audible over the music.

"Oh, that's us," she said. "Be right back." She hurried to the bar to take the phone.

"Who's Anne?" Oz asked Faith and Xander.

"Uh, that's Buffy's middle name," Xander explained. "We're using it as sort of a code."

Oz nodded, in understanding, then narrowed his eyebrows in question. But before he could say anything, Faith said, "I think, B wants you."

Oz saw Buffy waving for him to come over. She was still holding the phone and she said something they couldn't hear, but they were able to read her lips as she mouthed "Willow." Oz hopped off the stool and took the phone from her. Buffy returned to the table, picking up her jacket where she had laid it and put it on.

"What's the word?" Faith asked her.

"Eureka. They followed the goon back to their hideout. They're still at the harbor, but it seems they moved their HQ to a freighter on the docks."

"Are they okay?" Xander asked as they stood.

"Yeah, they're fine." Buffy waved toward the second floor and motioned to Angel that they were leaving. "As soon as they found out where they were they backed off to a safe distance."

"So, is Oz staying?"

"Yeah. If anyone can get Oz to stay, Willow can." She waved to the guitarist as they started for the door and he returned it, slight traces of a smile on his face as he spoke into the phone.

After meeting up with Angel at the door, they piled into her mom's car and drove off into the night.

End of Part Thirteen

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Fourteen

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Willow finally hung up the payphone and returned to the booth she and Giles had been sitting at in the road side diner. He was nursing a cup of tea with his spoon, his danish barely touched. They were the only customers in the place at the moment. There was a smile on the redhead's face as she sat down across from him.

"Everything was fine?" he asked.

"Huh?" she said, coming out of her almost dream-like state. "Oh, yeah. They left about ten minutes ago. I was talking to Oz."

"Oh?" Giles still marveled at how these kids were able to deal with their normal daily lives in between all the run-ins with monsters and demons. His admiration for their courage would never falter.

"Yeah. His band has a gig at the Bronze tonight. He wanted to leave to help us. But it seemed like Buffy was able to talk him out of it. And I told him that it would be best if he did stay there. I mean we have all the help we really need, don't we?" She looked at him.

"Oh, yes. No, Oz being here wouldn't change the odds very much. I mean, he is a nice lad and can certainly hold his own, in such situations, but I understand the band is important to him."

"Yeah." Willow stared at her own danish, which was half gone. During all the excitement of the day she and the rest of the gang barely took time to eat much. "And it's good that one of us can be apart from the monsters, at least for one night. Have, what we laughingly refer to here on the Hellmouth as, a normal Saturday."

Giles smiled at this and sipped his tea. Willow tore a small piece of her danish and popped it into her mouth. "They should be here in a few minutes then," he commented.

She nodded. "With Buffy driving. . . If they can avoid being pulled over for reckless driving." They chuckled knowingly. "Who would have thought that Buffy would be able to give Cordelia a run for her money as the worst driver on the road. OK, maybe she's not half as bad as Cordelia, considering that Cordy's been driving for a couple of years now, and Buffy has hardly been behind the wheel of the car."

"Yes. I think it would be a good idea to take her out for lessons sometime. What with her Slayer duties and school she rarely does have

time to focus on such things, such as learning how to drive."

"Do you think her mother would approve?" Willow said. "Buffy told me that her mom was really wiggy about allowing her to drive. She's still a little afraid that Buffy will, y'know, run away again."

"I believe Buffy has gotten past that phase of her life. Perhaps I should talk to her." Giles suddenly seemed a little uncomfortable. He cleared his throat and straightened his tie. Willow wondered why.

Buffy had been reluctant to discuss the time when nearly all the adults of Sunnydale had been under the influence of the cursed band candy, a few months ago, that had caused them to revert to their teenage personas. She was guessing that maybe something had happened during that time that Buffy did not want to think about. Something involving Giles? And the way he was acting just mentioning Mrs. Summers.

Willow came to the conclusion that she had more information than she needed. Now she understood why her friend did not want to talk about it. But then again, would it be so bad if Giles and Mrs. Summers did get together? she thought. It had been almost a year already since Ms. Calendar had died, and there had been no one in the Watcher's life since then.

Looking through Buffy's eyes, Willow knew the life of a Slayer was a lonely one, but since she moved to Sunnydale, Buffy's had her and Xander by her side, as well as Angel. And now Oz and Faith, a fellow Slayer. Sure, they were all there for Giles, too, but, even though the Watcher was fond of them all, he surely needed to socialize with people in his own age bracket. There was only so much time he could spend hanging around teenagers. His life had to be even more lonely. And his dedication to his Slayers seemed certain to keep it that way.

"Willow?" Giles asked.

"Huh?"

"You all right?"

She gave him a smile. "Yeah. Just too many thoughts right now."

"Worried about tonight?"

"No. Well, yeah, but that's not what I was thinking about." Willow saw him looking at her expectantly. He wasn't pressing her, letting it be her choice whether to share with him, and she appreciated that. "I was just wondering what was going to happen when we all graduate."

"I would imagine we will all go on with our lives," he said, gently.

"I guess. Going away to college and everything." She paused, then looked up. "What will Buffy do?"

Giles considered his answer for a moment. "With her SAT scores I'm

sure she'll be accepted to a very fine school."

"And she'll move away?"

"More than likely." He raised his cup to his lips.

Tentatively, she asked, "And what will you do?"

He set his cup down again. "I shall remain here. Where the action is, I suppose. It would also give me a chance to focus more on Faith's training, which she has been lacking since being without a Watcher of her own."

"It doesn't seem that Faith is lacking in the 'killing demons' area."

"No. She's practically a natural in slaying demons, but her study habits are somewhat atrocious."

Willow grinned. "I think there's something about her religion that states schooling is a deadly sin."

"Well, I hope to break her of that habit."

"You think you can get her to go back to school?" she asked.

"Oh, heavens. I admit I've acquired some experience in dealing with teenagers over the past couple of years, but I've not let that disillusion me to thinking I can create miracles. No, Faith and I will have to take things a little differently. Buffy has had her mother to look after her while I could not. Although I'm not complaining about being posted as Faith's 'temporary' Watcher, I think the Council may have been wrong in doing so. Faith would surely benefit more by having a full-time Watcher."

"But you're doing a great job! I mean, the way you handled the situation at the library. Not letting Faith go off by herself and getting killed. Personally, I didn't think you could have stopped her--" She stopped. "Uh, I meant, sure, you could have, but Faith can sometimes be-- well you know how she can get. . . . Good show, Giles!" she said and stuffed the rest of her danish into her mouth, filling her cheeks.

Giles lifted his cup again. "Thank you, Willow." He took a sip. Willow tried to say something to him around the danish in her mouth. "Willow, you really shouldn't talk with your mouth full."

Willow waved her hands frantically and pointed over his shoulder. Frowning, he looked to where she was pointing and, through the large pane glass windows, saw a group of people walking toward the diner. They were all wearing similar clothes and dark jackets. Just like the vampires he saw Angel fighting this morning.

The man in the lead was tall and carried with him an air of authority as he pushed open the door with the chime of the customer bell and plucked the "OPEN" sign from behind it. He held it up to his comrades.

"C'mon in, we're all invited," he said, holding the door for the others as they filed into the diner.

The waitress came out from behind the counter and approached the new arrivals. "Hello, how may I--"

Giles shot to his feet. "No! Stay away from them!" he shouted.

A stout vampire now in front of the group shoved the women away with one hand and sent her flying back over the long lunch counter where she tumbled to the floor in a heap, knocking over various items. The swinging door leading from the kitchen opened and the cook stepped out and saw the waitress on the floor.

"Sherri, what happened?" he said.

Then something dark green shot out from the kitchen behind him and wrapped itself around his neck. He gagged and clawed at it with his hands, fighting for air. Giles saw a tall rugged looking man wearing a trench coat step out of the door, the long appendage of his arm reeling into his sleeve as he moved closer to the cook.

"Hank!" Sherri exclaimed, as she pulled herself back to her feet.

The man with the tentacle arm leered close to Hank's face, which was turning blue from lack of oxygen. The demon smiled. "Say good-bye to Sherri, Hank."

With that, it pulled its tentacle the way a child would pull a wind-up string to release a spinning top, but in this case, effectively twisting the man's neck with a snap that reverberated through the diner. The demon let Hank's lifeless body drop to the floor.

"NO!" Willow screamed.

They were both on their feet now, and Giles stepped in front of the teenager, blocking her from the creatures with his body, but she still looked out around him. Then he glanced to their booth again and saw his weapon bag still in his seat where it was doing him absolutely no good whatsoever. "Bloody well done, Giles," he hissed to himself.

He could probably make a dive for it but that would only entice the creatures to move on them more quickly. And he really wouldn't be able to hold them all off for long. Best to bide their time for now.

He figured most of them were vampires from the way they acted as they entered, but some of them were probably different kinds of monsters. Especially the chap who just killed the cook. He counted eight, plus the demon from the kitchen. Nine in all. If Faith was right, it seemed like Oranstine's entire force was here. He even saw the human he and Willow had trailed to the docks. He must have noticed being followed, he thought.

But where was Oranstine? he wondered.

The demon entourage was walking slowly toward them, there rank filling the width of the diner. Sherri, the waitress, had backed away from them along the counter, until it ended, so she scrambled over

the top, dropping napkin dispensers and salt and pepper shakers. One of the men in front of the group vamped out, his fangs flashing and tensed to spring at the woman.

"No, wait!" Giles shouted.

He succeeded in getting the creature's attention and it shot the Watcher a look. The vampire growled at him and was about to pounce anyway.

"Hold!" a voice shouted from behind the creatures. The tall man, who was now wearing his vampire face, walked out in front of the group once more, obviously in charge of this little party.

The waitress reached them and Giles pulled her behind him and Willow as they slowly back away to the other end of the diner. Looking over his shoulder, he saw there was no way out on that side. Even the bathrooms were on the opposite side, behind the creatures.

"Please don't get pulled over, Buffy," Willow whispered behind him.

The creatures had now stopped their advance and the lead vamp stepped two paces from the rest. He regarded the humans with a sadistic smile. "My, you have been a busy Watcher. Imagine our surprise when we arrived at the High School and found the library empty."

"Good call, Giles," Willow whispered to him.

The vamp continued. "And when we learned about the failure at the Slayer's home. . ."

The trench-coat demon with the tentacle arm, who was behind the counter now, interrupted by saying, "We were not informed about the second Slayer's escape!"

The lead vamp shot his gaze at the demon. "Hold your tongue! And be glad the Master allowed you to keep it! The failure is still yours!" He turned his attention back to the cornered humans. "Fortunately, not everyone in our employ is a complete idiot."

The human in the group of demons spoke up. "I did lead them directly into your laps, didn't I?"

"Which is the only thing that saved your life," the vamp hissed at him. "Unlike your partner."

The human turned his attention to Giles. "I hope you're a better Watcher than you are a field agent."

Willow suddenly shouted, "He's good enough to have his Slayers hand you Tarakans your asses back to you wrapped in fruit baskets!" The redhead quickly slapped a hand over her mouth and ducked back behind Giles. She looked as surprised as he was by her outburst.

This actually brought a chuckle to the tall lead vamp, as well as some of the others, who were obviously not a part of the Taraka Order. "This is true," the vamp said. "The Slayers are most extraordinary. They will make very powerful vampires when we turn them."

"After your master creates more of these Slayer Vampires?" Giles said.

The vamp raised a grotesque eyebrow. "You have been busy, indeed. I'm impressed."

Good, Giles thought. As long as they were impressed they weren't draining them of their blood from the necks. Now if only Buffy and the others would show up, right now. Of course, 'right now,' came and went and they were still here with a diner full of demons. Need to keep stalling.

"We also know your master is Oranstine." He met the human's gaze. "Does that name sound familiar to the Order of Taraka?"

But it was the trench-coat demon who answered. "Oranstine is dead. We killed that demon two hundred years ago."

"Yes," Giles said, "You took its head, but it did not die."

"Enough of this!" roared the lead vamp. "You're just stalling for time. No doubt the Slayers are already on their way. And with you, we'll have hostages to play against them."

It seemed as if their time was up, and the creatures started to move forward again. Thinking quickly, Giles shouted, "You can have me! I won't resist. I'll be your hostage! But you must let the women go!"

"No!" Willow shouted at him. "I'm not gonna leave you!"

Before Giles could argue with her, the vamp said, "That's most certainly true. It is well known that you Watchers have a nasty character trait of being so self-sacrificing. Especially when it comes to your Slayers, you wouldn't hesitate to give up your life." The creature's eyes seemed to intensify as he glared at Giles. "In the end, however, it did not save young Noriko from her fate."

There was a new tint in the Watcher's eyes. One of anger. "So, Wallace is dead." He made it a statement.

"That surprises you?"

"No, not at all," Giles said, in almost a casual tone.

"Giles," Willow said. He looked down to see her looking at him in shock. "You were planning on killing yourself?"

Giles opened his mouth to say something, but he was suddenly speechless. But Willow saw the truth in his eyes.

Before anyone else could say anything, all the lights in the diner went out. There was a silent moment of confusion from all occupants in the building....

The lead vamp shouted, "Take them now!"

Of course, after that all fucking hell broke loose.

End of Part Fourteen

3. Part 15 to Epilogue

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Fifteen

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"This must be the place," Buffy said, as the diner came into view. Buffy was about to turn into the parking lot.

"No, Buffy! Keep going straight!" Angel suddenly called from behind her.

"What is it?" she asked, puzzled, but automatically did what he said. She slowed the jeep as they passed by the diner.

"Giles and Willow aren't alone."

She focused her gaze and saw what he had seen. A group of vampires were in the diner and appeared to have their friends trapped. "Damn! They must have been spotted." She quickly shut off the headlights and pulled to the shoulder, away from any street lights. The diner was still in sight.

"We got to get in there!" Xander exclaimed from the back.

"Let's go!" Faith grabbed the handle to the passenger door.

"Wait!" Angel insisted. "If they see us coming they'll definitely make their move."

"Well, I'm not waiting!"

"He's right," Buffy agreed, catching Faith's arm in her hand. "It looks like Giles is stalling for time. But it won't last long. Angel," she glanced in the rearview mirror to look in the back seat before realizing he wouldn't appear in it, and turned in her seat. "Can you get around to the back?"

"Just give me thirty seconds. If you guys can sneak up to the front and wait for my signal?"

"What's the signal?" Faith asked.

"You'll know." Angel threw open his door and he seemed to fade into the night as soon as it was closed again.

"Let's move!" Buffy said. "Xander, arm yourself."

"Way ahead of you, Buff." The teenager was stuffing a stake into the waistband of his baggy jeans and hefted a wooden baseball bat.

"So much for our surprise attack," Faith commented.

The three of them evacuated the jeep and ran in low crouches across the parking lot of the diner, which was only partially lit due to only two dull street lights. But they would not be invisible to a

vampire's keen eyesight. Luckily, it seemed they were all focused on the humans inside. Buffy was leading the way and she headed straight for Giles's car parked right in front of the diner. Xander, without the benefit of Slayer efficiency, was falling behind the females.

"Hurry!" Faith called back in a whisper.

"Don't wait for me!" he replied.

The Slayers reached the car and ducked behind the rear bumper. No sooner had they reached it, when all the lights in the diner shorted out.

"That's it!" Buffy hissed, in a whisper.

She and Faith split from each other and charged up the sides of the car straight for the diner.

* * * * *

The lead vamp shouted, "Take them now!"

There were suddenly seven pairs of yellow eyes glowing in the darkness of the diner as the rest of the vampires put on their 'game' faces. Giles braced himself for attack, keeping Willow and Sherri behind him, when one of the large windows exploded inward right in front of them. Amid the shower of glass he saw Buffy land inside the diner catching the lead vamp in a tackle that threw them to the counter. The glass hadn't even settled yet, and she was already lashing out with a back-kick into the nearest vampire, sending him stumbling back into another vampire and the human Tarakan, all the while keeping the lead vamp pinned face-down on the counter top.

At the same time, Faith had crashed through another window, landing behind the group. Just as the closest vampire turned to face her, Faith was also turning in a spinning heel kick that connected with the vamp's face and sent him flying against the counter. A second vampire came at her with a right cross to her face that she deflected with a wave her left palm, causing the creature to step off balance, then she countered with a right ridge-hand strike to his throat. He gagged, clutching his throat, and Faith grabbed two handfuls of the back of his jacket and tossed him toward the front door.

Xander had just reached the Citroen, no longer running in a crouch since seeing Faith and Buffy crash into the diner, and the party seemed well on its way. Once again, fashionably late, he thought. He was heading for the front entrance when a vampire suddenly burst through, sending glass and the metal doorframe onto the parking lot. The vampire stumbled right for him, trying to regain his balance, and Xander broke his bat in half when he swung it across the creature's face. The vampire's momentum kept it moving forward, but Xander saw him do a really cool backflip, from the impact, and land on his chest hard. With the broken handle of the bat in his hand, Xander realized he had a makeshift stake. He dropped to his knees, beside the creature, and slammed the jagged point into the vamp's back. The creature roared in pain and threw the teenager off with a powerful arm. Xander tumbled back and saw the vampire rise to its knees, the bat handle still sticking out of its back.

"Close," it growled at him. "But no heart."

Inside the diner, the trench coat demon hopped onto the lunch counter and ran along the top planning to jump Faith, as she fought against the vampires. But the kitchen door swung open and Angel rushed out just in time to sweep his arm, clipping the demon's legs below the kneecaps. The demon executed a clumsy flip through the air and smashed through one of the booth tables along the side wall.

On the opposite side of the diner, Buffy ducked as the lead vamp swung a back elbow at her face. The momentum brought him face to face with the blonde Slayer and she sent a one-two combo into his face, following through with a spinning backhand that sent him sprawling to the floor. With that foe momentarily out of the way, she turned to face the next threat, and took a hard fist to the face. As she stumbled a step back, she saw a stout, solid looking vampire advancing on her and just barely blocked the front kick aimed at her abdomen.

Xander scrambled to his feet and pulled the stake from his waistband trying to imitate one of Buffy's fighting stances. The vampire charged him, snarling as it flashed its fangs. Xander wielded the stake and aimed for the creature's heart, and he seemed on target, too. But the vamp knocked the wooden weapon from his hand with the swipe of a forearm and the teenager felt pain stab his wrist. He tried to back away but the vampire grabbed him by the front of his shirt and hurled him over the hood of the car, clearing it completely, and came down hard on the other side. Xander pushed himself off the pavement and looked over his shoulder to see the vampire standing on the Citroen's hood, glaring down at him. He threw himself flat on his back, as it dropped down on top of him, tucking his knees to his chest. The soles of his sneakers were planted against the vamp's chest and its fangs came within inches of Xander's face. Heaving with all of his strength, he kicked the vampire off and the creature flew back and could not regain its balance before it fell against the car's large fender. Xander saw the point of the broken bat burst out of the vamp's chest and it didn't even have time to scream when it exploded into ash.

When the diner turned into one big free-for-all, Giles had dove for his weapon bag as the group's attention was divided between the two Slayers, and then Angel had jumped in seconds later, throwing himself into the fray. He reached the table and pulled his bag out of the seat. Then something slammed into him from the side and he lost his bag. It was the human Tarakan, he realized, just before he was punched across the face. He managed to keep his balance, and, miraculously, his glasses, too. The Tarakan came at him again, pulling a large hunting knife from his belt. Giles caught the man's wrist stopping the blade from stabbing him through the chest, but was forced back against the table and the man leaned his weight behind the knife, which was hovering over the Watcher's face. Giles had to use both hands to keep the blade at bay and the Tarakan clamped his free hand around Giles' throat.

Sherri screamed and ran into the farthest corner of the diner, and Willow was suddenly standing by herself. Then she saw a lithe vampire hop onto the counter and jumped high over Buffy and the two vampires she was currently occupied with and land right in front of her. The redhead pulled out her cross as the creature reached for her and shoved it in front of its face. The vampire hissed and brought its

hands up to shield itself and unintentionally knocked the cross from Willow's hand, sending it flying across the diner. They both just stood there for a stunned moment staring at each other. Then the creature roared and slammed an open palm against the teen's chest. Willow's feet left the floor and she landed on top of one of the booth tables, the wind knocked out of her. She saw the vampire advance on her and rolled herself down onto the seat, then quickly dropped underneath the table. She reached into the pocket of her overalls and pulled out a small bottle of holy water. From under the table she could see the vampire's legs striding towards her. She pulled the top off the bottle.

Buffy finally gained the upper hand on the stout vampire with a sharp fist to its nose and sent him flying with a hard front kick to the chest. But just as she freed herself of that creature, another vamp was charging her. She side-stepped and used its own momentum to send him flying over the counter, where it shattered the long mirror on the wall, and fell out of sight. The Slayer took in her immediate surroundings and saw Willow disappear under a table as a vampire stalked her. She hurried forward but two powerful arms wrapped themselves around her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides. It was the stout vampire again. Struggling, Buffy knew she wasn't going to be able to break the hold soon enough, and she could only watch as the vampire ripped the table from the wall, stripping Willow of her hiding place.

"Willow!" Buffy shouted.

The skinny vamp grabbed the redhead by the strap of her overalls and hauled her to her feet. Willow didn't make a sound but she dropped something from her hand and it shattered, scattering glass on the floor at her feet. Buffy was helpless to stop the vamp from leaning close to her friend, its fangs aiming for her neck.

Then Willow spit directly in its face. Completely drenching it.

Understanding swept through the Slayer as the vampire began to claw at its own face when its flesh began to smoke, releasing Willow. The redhead pulled out a stake from her overalls and held it with both hands, her chin damped with holy water. She gave a yell and plunged the sharp point into the creature's chest.

Buffy actually giggled in relief as the vamp disintegrated. Then she turned her attention back to the goon that had her pinned. She kicked a leg back and up between the vampire's legs. It grunted in pain and she shoved herself back, slamming it against the counter and she was free.

"Buffy!" Willow shouted and tossed her stake to her.

The Slayer snatched it out of the air and whirled on the vampire. Two seconds later, it was a pile of ashes.

Faith still had her hands full with the other two vampires. Their attack was slowly driving her into a corner and she was a fury of motion as she deflected most of it. A chambered leg blocked a mid-level kick from vamp one and a raised forearm blocked a right hook from vamp two, then she ducked under vamp two's left hook and deflected vamp one's right hook with an open palm wave. But a fist

finally snuck by her defenses, as the back of her thighs came up against the corner table, and plowed into her stomach. Then the other vamp punched her across the face, sending her on top of the table. She kicked her legs at them as they moved in to restrain her but they were too close. Then vamp one was suddenly pulled away from her and she saw Angel wrapping his hands around the vamp's neck and flip it over his shoulder in a reverse head lock. The vamp's lower body slammed on the top of the counter and it flopped limply to the floor on its back. This distracted vamp two long enough for her to send the heel of her foot into the vampire's chin and its head snapped back painfully. She hopped back to the floor and immediately drove a knee into its gut, then grabbed its shoulder, as it bent forward, and smashed its face against the table. The vampire slumped there, cheek resting against the wooden surface, and Faith sent a kick under the table that broke through it and the vampire's face. She had nearly broke the table in half and she ripped off a large chunk of the wood that had a nasty looking point, as vamp two fell to the floor. She brought her new weapon up to drive it into the vampire's heart when vamp one got to its feet and charged her. Reversing her hold she let vamp one impale itself on the wooden point. Its ashes were still falling when Faith drove it through vamp two's chest and its ashes left an outline of itself around the piece of wood sticking up from the tiled floor.

No sooner had Angel freed Faith of one of the vampires had the long tentacle wrap itself around his neck and he was pulled around to face the trench coat demon. Having no need to breath, the blockage of his airway really didn't effect him, but he was concerned that its grip could snap his neck, and he struggled to untangle himself. But the demon did not give him time and swung him around in a wide arc until he slammed into the wall. Angel was dazed, but he did not release his hold from the tentacle, and the demon reeled the appendage into its sleeve dragging the vampire to it so it could smash a fist into his face.

Giles drove his knee into the Tarakan's side, making the man waver slightly, and deflected the tip of the knife away from his face and let it bury itself into the surface of the table. The Watcher then headbutted the man in the face, again without losing his glasses, and kicked him off. The Tarakan stumbled back but regained his balance and was about to come after Giles again when Buffy grabbed him by the shoulder. One second later, he was flying over the counter and disappearing from sight.

Buffy turned to her Watcher. "You all right, Giles?"

"Look out!" he shouted.

She turned just in time to duck under the lead vampire's punch aimed at her face and came back up with an uppercut to its chin. But, this time, the vamp shook off her blow and retaliated with a hard left that sent the Slayer spinning. As the lead vamp pressed its advantage Giles came up from behind with his hands clamped together and brought the huge fist down on the back of its head. This succeeded in only getting the vampire's undivided attention and it turned to face the Watcher. Giles took a step back then threw another punch at its face. The lead vamp caught his fist in an open palm. It snarled at him and grabbed the front of his shirt at the knot of his tie lifting his feet off the floor.

There was a loud ripping sound of splintering wood behind the lead vamp.

"Hey, snaggletooth!"

The vampire looked over his shoulder giving Buffy a perfect target to swing the seat of the stool, she had ripped from the floor, across its face. It was as if the vampire was suddenly torn away from her Watcher, and Giles fell to the floor, coughing for air, and he watched in grim satisfaction as the creature flew halfway across the diner.

Meanwhile, Angel was still struggling against the trench-coat demon's hold.

"Hey!"

The demon turned his head and saw Faith standing behind him.

"Aren't you supposed to be dead?" she asked.

Then she slammed a hard round kick into the demon's side. It staggered and its hold on Angel loosened and the vampire freed himself. He came in swinging a powerful fist into the creature's face as Faith pressed her attack and they began to methodically pummel the bad guy. Then it swung its tentacle in a wide arc and swatted them away.

Raising the stool ready to strike, Buffy started towards the lead vamp again. That was when the vampire she had sent over the counter reappeared, and the human Tarakan stood up next to it. The vampire was snarling and flashing its fangs at her, but the Tarakan was brandishing a sleek 9mm Baretta. And he was aiming directly at Buffy.

Buffy threw herself to the floor, falling back, keeping the stool held in front of her and she felt bullets hit the metal stem.

"Buffy!" she heard Giles and Angel yell at the same time as she hit the floor.

The Tarakan swung the gun toward the other end of the diner and fired off several shots, forcing Angel to dive behind the end of the counter. Faith threw herself into the trench-coat demon and swung it around so that its back was facing the gunman and the bullets meant for her ricocheted off the demon's hard back. Then the Tarakan swung the gun back at Buffy.

"No!" roared the lead vamp, still on the floor. "I want the Slayers alive!"

But it didn't look as if the Tarakan was paying attention or was just out right ignoring his orders, and Buffy knew he was going to pull the trigger. This close, there was no way he was going to miss, and she had lost the little protection of the stool when she had hit the floor.

Giles threw himself on top of her, using his larger frame to shield

her body.

"Giles no!" she screamed, just as the gun went off.

The bullet dug into the floor right next to her head, missing her and Giles by mere inches. Pushing against her Watcher, she saw that the vampire, behind the counter with the Tarakan, had grabbed the human just as he pulled the trigger, deflecting the shot just enough to spare them. But the vamp wasn't done yet. It swung the human around and buried its fangs deep into his neck. The human screamed and tried to struggle as the creature ripped through its neck, not feeding, only killing, and the human quickly went limp.

The lead vamp was on his feet again and was striding towards her. Then the other vampire jumped over the counter and looked down at her as well.

"Giles move!" she shouted.

He rolled away from her and she started to rise. That was when the lead vamp kicked her in the face and she flew back, knocking Giles down again as he was getting to his feet. She shook her head to clear the stars she was seeing and found herself lying across her Watcher.

"We have got to work on our dance moves a little more," she told him.

"Indeed," he replied, as they pulled themselves to their feet.

She was holding his arm, helping him up. The shorter vampire reached them first and swung a fist at them.

"Duck!" Buffy shouted. She planted the palm of her hand against his back and forced him to lean forward and the punch missed him. At the same time she was delivering a side-kick into the lead vamp's chest, who was coming at them from her side, causing him to stumble a couple of steps back. Then she side-stepped her Watcher to slam a front kick into the shorter vampire's stomach. As it bent forward from the pain, she saw the lead vamp coming at them again. Still holding Giles' arm she side-stepped him again, spinning into a roundhouse kick that caught the lead vamp across the face, and Giles took the opportunity to kick the shorter vampire in the face, and both vamps fell to the floor at the same time.

Buffy smiled at her Watcher. "That was better!"

"Indeed."

"Uh, oh," Buffy said, and pushed Giles away from her. He fell into one of the table seats just as the lead vamp slammed into his Slayer, carrying her to the side of the diner.

Buffy struggled for leverage but the vamp had her nearly off the floor, her toes barely touching, and it seemed as if it was determined in driving her into the wall. The lead vamp threw her with, what felt like all of its strength, into the wall and all the wind was knocked out of her and she fell to the table top under her. She was dazed and her vision was blurred, but she saw the tall vamp about to reach out for her again, when it suddenly stopped. It

turned its eyes and locked its gaze on Willow, who was kneeling next to the waitress, probably watching over her. The redhead's eyes widened as the vamp looked at her.

"You!" it declared.

And what surprised Buffy was that the vamp actually turned away from her and took a step toward Willow.

A new surge of adrenaline hit her system and Buffy sprung to her feet and leaped off the table onto the lead vamp's back, wrapping her arms around its neck.

"Willow, run!" she shouted.

Willow pulled the waitress to her feet and they made a run for it. The lead vamp reached out for Willow, but Buffy jerked on its neck as hard as she could forcing it to grab at her arms before she broke it.

Willow and Sherri made it out of the vampire's reach and they saw Giles, who was struggling against the only other vampire still alive. The creature was slowly lowering its bloodstained mouth toward the Watcher's neck. Then Xander finally came running into the diner, through the broken doorway, and threw himself at the vampire. The teenager managed to push the vamp away from Giles and slam it against the counter. He had taken the creature off guard, but with its superior strength, it would soon throw him off of itself. Willow pulled out her other stake, just as Giles straightened himself on his feet again.

"Giles!" she shouted, and tossed the stake to him.

He caught the wooden weapon in his opened palm and advanced on the vampire, just as it shoved Xander away. The vamp did not have the time to defend itself before Giles pierced its heart with the stake.

The vampire began to twist itself from side to side, in an attempt to throw Buffy off its back, but the blonde Slayer wrapped her legs around its waist, securing her hold. Then it changed its tactics and slammed itself back against the far corner of the wall, and the wind was knocked out of her for the second time in the past minute, and Buffy was unable to keep herself from releasing her hold and she slid down the wall. But instead of finishing her off, the vamp immediately started to march away, heading with purpose, after Willow again. She didn't know what the creature wanted with Willow, but it was important enough so that it would turn its back on a Slayer, so she was certain that it meant to kill her. Buffy threw herself forward, stretching her body as far as she could, reached out, and caught the heel of the vamp's boot, just before he was out of reach. He hit the floor with a satisfying thud.

The vamp kicked its foot free from her grasp and started to rise to its feet. Buffy forced herself to move and she stood up just a second after the vampire did, and had to quickly duck the powerful fist it swung at her head. She was much faster than the vampire and she came back up leading with an uppercut to its chin, followed by a quick left and right combo. The blows staggered it but did not appear to do much damage. This one was a tough one, she thought, and forearm

blocked another punch, then used the same arm to slam a backhand fist across its face and continued with a following left hook, spinning into another right backhand. But the lead vamp caught it by the wrist and yanked her in close to raise a knee into her midsection, then, in an almost casual manner, tossed her into the air. She came down hard on another table, this one before one of the large pane windows. Her body was starting to feel like one massive bruise again and Buffy knew she wasn't going to last much longer if this fight didn't end soon.

Finally deciding that he needed the pesky Slayer out of the way if it wanted to reach Willow, the lead vamp came charging at her, just as she was sliding her legs off the table. Buffy waited until the last second, then dropped under the vampire's reaching arms, its momentum carrying it forward through the now empty space, and she put her shoulder against its thighs. With all of her strength, she flipped the vamp over the table and it sailed through the large window in an explosion of glass.

Catching her breath, she leaned against the table and watched for the lead vamp to return. After a few seconds, it still did not reappear. Buffy stood on one of the seats and leaned closer to the broken window. She was able to see the open yard on the side of the diner, the glass littered on the grass, but the vampire was nowhere to be seen.

Figuring it must have retreated, Buffy hopped down and rushed over to the others, where it looked like they had just finished off the last vampire. Giles was dusting ash from his tweed jacket, a stake in his hand.

"You guys all right?" she asked.

"We're all fine," Giles told her.

Sherri, the waitress was standing close by but kept herself apart from everyone, silent with a unbelieving expression on her face. Poor woman, Buffy thought. But there wasn't much they could do for her right now, and soon everyone's attention turned to the other end of the diner where silence had fell.

Angel and Faith had backed the trench-coat demon into a far corner and when either the vampire or the Slayer tried to move in closer, it would swing its tentacle arm in a wide arc to keep them back. It was pretty much a stalemate.

Buffy saw the large hunting knife imbedded in the surface of a nearby table and pulled it out as she led the others across the diner, until they were all spread out behind Angel and Faith. She saw the worry on the demon's face double as it was surrounded.

"So, are you going to give up?" she asked it.

The demon sneered at her. "You'll just kill me again."

"You bet your ass," Faith said. "And this time we'll make sure you stay dead."

"No, wait!" Buffy shouted, before the demon decided to suicide-charge them. She threw a look at Faith that said "shut the hell up" and took

a step closer. "We'll make you a deal."

"Tarakans do not make deals with our targets."

"C'mon. We'll let you go if you deliver a message to the rest of the Order of Taraka."

The demon did not say anything for a few seconds. "What message?" it finally asked.

"There *is* no contract on the Slayers anymore. After tonight, there will be no one around to pay you."

A long moment of silence again. Then the demon swung its tentacle and they all jumped back. But it hadn't been aiming at them and it smashed the closest window to the corner and before anyone could react, it dove out of the diner and was running out into the night.

"I hope that was a `yes'," Xander said.

"It doesn't matter," Buffy said, turning around and they started toward the entrance of the diner. She slipped her new knife into the back of her waistband. "We don't have time to waste on him, that vamp that got away is no doubt on his way to tell Oran that they failed."

"So what do we do now?" Willow asked.

"We stick to the original plan," Faith said.

"We don't have any choice," Buffy agreed.

They all filed out of the trashed diner and gathered close to the Citroen. Giles was the last one out, having retrieved his weapon bag.

"Faith and I will go in first. You guys will follow us to keep any of Oran's henchgoons off our backs. Hopefully, there aren't many left. Angel, stay very close to them."

Angel nodded, his promise in his eyes. Then she looked at the frightened waitress. She turned to her Watcher. "Giles, can--"

He nodded. "I'll talk to her and make sure she's safely on her way."

Satisfied, she turned to Faith.

"Let's load up," the brunette said.

The Slayers marched back toward the jeep to arm themselves.

End of Part Fifteen

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Sixteen

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Buffy brought the jeep to a stop in front of the docks and the

Slayers got out. Buffy was holding a battle ax and Faith brought out a bat with a large fisherman's hook at the head. They stepped out in front of the jeep as the Citroen pulled up beside it. Giles, Angel, Willow, and Xander piled out and joined them. Beyond the large stacks of crates they saw a frigate docked with its gangplank leading up to the old ship.

"Is that it?" Faith asked.

"Yes," Giles nodded.

"Okay. You guys stay behind us," Buffy said.

She and Faith walked side by side as they crossed to the concrete surface of the docks. The large crates were forming an artificial canyon around them and the back of Buffy's neck started to tingle.

"This would be a good place for an ambush," Faith voiced her thought.

The ship was still in sight and about a hundred yards away, but they were in the middle of the gorge now.

Still watchful of the shadows around them, Buffy said, "Do you feel--"

"Like we're being watched?" Faith finished.

"Yeah."

"Buffy," Angel said. "We're being followed."

"We know," she said, without looking back. "How many?"

"I make out three, but they're pretty far back still."

"Now we have three in front," Faith said.

Three shadowy figures had stepped into view at the mouth of the passage. They were broad and built, two of them were holding clubs that Buffy found familiar, and the third was holding what looked like a machete.

"I was wondering where our girl was keeping these guys," Faith said. Buffy glanced at Faith. "I ran into some of them while I was in the cave. They try to disguise themselves as human but they do a lousy job."

Buffy stopped as the three got closer and she was starting to make out their inhuman features. "It looks like they got over their shyness." Then she got a clearer look at them and her eyes widened. "I know these guys."

"You do?" Faith asked.

"From where?" Giles asked from behind.

"During my time when I was . . . `away'. Remember, I told you about that dimension I was sucked into where those guys were kidnapping

homeless kids to make them slaves?"

"These are they?"

"I doubt they're the same guys but they're definitely from the same demonic family tree."

"Who cares?" Faith put in. "We can kill them, that's all that matters."

"And their buddies behind us are getting closer," Xander informed them.

"Keep moving forward," Buffy said, and the group started walking again.

Giles was right behind Faith and Angel was behind Buffy, both had their hands behind their backs, with Willow and Xander bringing up the rear. The three creatures behind them had started to jog after them to close the distant, but the three in front were still closer and they started to charge the group. Buffy and Faith didn't stop but they brought their weapons up, ready to meet the attack.

"Now!" Faith shouted.

She and Buffy smoothly separated from each other allowing Giles and Angel to step out between them, and the Watcher and vampire brought out crossbows from behind their backs and released at the same time. Two of the goons were suddenly lying on the concrete with crossbow bolts protruding from their chests. The third inhuman only had two seconds to look upon its fallen comrades before he looked down at his own chest to see the hilt of the small dagger Faith had thrown. Then it, too, collapsed to the ground.

"You two get going!" Giles told his Slayers, slinging his crossbow over his shoulder. "We'll handle the rest."

"Right." Buffy tossed her battle ax and Giles caught it and turned with Angel to face the other three demons. "Faith."

"Heads up, Xand," the brunette tossed him the hooked bat and the teenager caught it. Angel had handed his crossbow to Willow and she was pulling out another bolt, from Giles' weapon bag on her shoulder, to reload it.

The Slayers hurried off toward the ship again, picking up the dead demons' weapons. Buffy had a club with studded metal spikes, and Faith had the machete. They were out in the open now and the others were lost in the shadows between the crate walls. Buffy hated leaving them behind like this but Oranstone and the Slayer Vampire were even more dangerous and she definitely did not want them facing either of them.

They did not run into any more thugs, so hopefully Oran had finally run out of them. They reached the gangplank and Faith charged up first, but she paused on the top deck to wait for Buffy, weapon held ready, scanning for danger. The ship looked deserted.

"This is the part I hate," Buffy whispered.

"C'mon, B. This is the most exciting part. The anticipation," Faith said. "Should we split up?"

"No. The only way we're gonna beat these two is if we stay together."

"She's really that good?" Faith asked.

"I hate to admit it."

"Only the fact that this chick is invulnerable is what makes her so tough. We get rid of Oran and we should be able to take her down."

They started moving toward the back, looking in through the port holes of the closed doors as they passed. "I just hope we don't have to fight them both at the same time," Buffy said.

"If we do, you just keep fang-girl busy and I'll handle Oran. She's all mine."

They came to the access hatch leading to the lower decks. Buffy reached for the handle and met Faith's eyes. She nodded that she was ready and Buffy jerked the hatch up. They gazed down the steep stairs leading into a narrow corridor filled with shadows. It looked empty.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," Faith said.

"On the count of--"

Faith stepped out over the hatchway and dropped inside.

"--three," Buffy said, to no one.

She quickly dropped down to the corridor behind the brunette. Faith was already opening cabin doors on both sides of the hall.

"Faith, slow down!" Buffy hissed.

"C'mon, we don't want them to get away, do we?" she replied.

Before Buffy could say anything else, she was cut off when a voice came from up ahead of them.

"Oh, would you two knock it off, already!"

They exchanged another look then walked purposefully to the open portal at the end of the hall. It opened into the cargo hold. There were only a few boxes and small crates stacked along the walls, but for the most part, it was empty. That is, except for the table to one side and the weary looking figure of a man tied to a chair. Oh, and the Slayer Vampire standing right behind him.

They stepped through the portal and stood side by side, weapons held ready.

The young vampire who used to be Noriko Amano smiled pleasantly at

them. She had changed out of the street clothes she had been wearing when Buffy had fought her, probably because they had been drenched in the creature's; and some of Buffy's; blood, and was now uniformed in the trademark jacket and attire of one of Oran's minions.

"Welcome. It's a pleasure to see you both again. How's your side, Buffy?"

"Screw you," Buffy hissed.

Faith glanced at her partner, surprised at the sudden anger coming from the blonde. But then again, getting your ass kicked can cause a little resentment, she thought. The Slayer Vampire continued to smile. From the pocket of her jacket, she pulled out a stake. The sharp tip was stained red. With blood. With Buffy's blood, Faith realized. The vampire brought the tip under her nose and closed her eyes as she inhaled deeply. With a sigh of pleasure, she opened her eyes again and looked straight at the blonde Slayer.

"You have no idea how hungry you're making me feel right now, just looking at you."

"You want to try the diet plan I have for you?" Buffy replied. She took a step to her right and Faith took her cue to step to the left and they started to circle round the vamp's position.

"Uh-uh, none of that." The vampire pressed the tip of the stake over the man's heart, wrapping her free hand around his throat.

The Slayers stopped where they were.

"Who is he?" Faith asked.

"He's her Watcher," Buffy answered. To the man, she said, "Wallace?"

"Yes," he managed to say around the vampire's grip. "Please, stop her. Don't let her go on like this."

The Slayer Vampire faked sorrow. "Wallace, you know you hurt me when you say things like that. I'm still your Slayer." She released his throat and caressed the top of her hand against his cheek. The Watcher closed his eyes and a tear ran down his other cheek. "And soon you will be my Watcher again. A Slayer cannot be without her Watcher." She looked at Buffy again. "This one knows exactly what I'm talking about. Don't you, Slayer?"

Faith saw Buffy swallow hard and she fought to keep her voice steady. "Let him go. This is between us."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Why haven't you already turned him into a vampire?" Faith asked.

The vampire finally looked at Faith. "The master would not allow it. She feared that I was too emotionally attached to him, and if I sired him it may interfere with the master's mark." She nodded toward her left arm where her tattoo was hidden under the jacket. "But I couldn't let him be killed."

"But you're planning on turning him anyway?" this from Buffy.

"Yes. But the only way I can do that is if the master is dead."

"So why don't *you* kill her?" Faith snapped.

"You know as well as I do that we cannot kill the master. Although, now, you can it seems."

"What do you mean?"

"As soon as your connection with the master was broken, she knew about it." The vampire smiled at the memory. "Oh, she was pissed. The first human Slayer under her control and she thought she had lost you. But then the connection was re-established, for just a couple of minutes, and she realized that she was only being blocked out by an outside source of magic."

Faith and Buffy looked at each other, both thinking the same thing. Willow's protection spell. Faith willed herself not to look down at the leather pouch hanging against her chest, partially hidden by her half-zipped sweat shirt.

"Why don't you just take your Watcher and run?" Buffy said, to change the subject.

"I would if I could. But there is a range to the master's mark, sort of like a leash. You can only travel so far before something inside you starts screaming at you to return."

"Really?" Faith said. "I never felt anything like that."

"That's because you did not have the mark long enough. That's why the master had you locked up. It takes about a day for the mark to integrate completely with you. I suppose you already know the mark makes you invulnerable?" At Faith's expression, her smile grew wider. "That's one of its first benefits. But if the magic that is blocking the master from you is removed now, you will not be able to refuse her when she calls you. And the closer you are the more control the master will have over you."

Something finally clicked inside Buffy and her voice was full of dread when she spoke. "Where is Oranstone now?"

"Why, she went out with everyone else to go find you two." She looked at them with innocent eyes. "Didn't you see her?"

"Faith, let's go!" Buffy turned toward the portal.

"What!?" Faith exclaimed. "We're just going to leave?"

"Oranstone's our real threat right now. Besides, we can't kill her while Oran's still alive." She looked at the Slayer Vampire once more. "Aren't you worried that you might die when we kill your master?"

The vampire seemed to consider this for a moment. Then she shrugged, nonchalantly. "I'm a vampire. I'm already dead."

Buffy glared at her for a moment then looked at the Watcher. "We'll be back, I promise." She whirled around and strode out of the cargo hold. Faith followed her. Buffy started to run.

"B, what's the hurry?" Faith asked.

"Oranstone knows that Willow was the one who cast the protection spell," she said, as they climbed up the stairs to the top deck. "She was the vampire who got away!"

End of Part Sixteen

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Seventeen

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It had only been about three minutes since Buffy and Faith had hurried ahead to the docked ship and their fight with the three remaining inhumans was well on its way. Being a vampire and the strongest in their group, two of the demons focused on Angel, while the last kept Giles and Xander occupied. Willow already had a bolt loaded in the crossbow Angel had given her, but she dare not try her luck at hitting one of the goons for fear of hitting one of her friends. Also considering that her skills with this weapon were nonexistent.

Angel had started the fight barehanded, but he had managed to relinquish a club from one of his opponents and was steadily gaining the upper hand now. The third one seemed to be holding its own against the teenager and the Watcher. Willow cringed when the demon blocked a swing from Giles' ax and delivered a side kick that knocked Xander to the concrete, but Giles finally got through its defense and buried the blade of the ax into the creature's back, and she turned her head away from the grisly sight. When she looked up again she saw that Xander and Giles were moving in to help finish off Angel's opponents.

"Willow," someone whispered her name from behind her.

She turned and saw a faint outline of someone standing in a narrow space between two of the large crates. "Willow," the figure said again and stepped out of the shadow.

"Buffy!" Willow moved closer. "What are you doing back here? Where's Faith?"

She saw a worried expression on her friend's face. "There's something wrong with her. I don't think the spell's working anymore."

"What?"

"C'mon, I'll take you to her!"

"But what about--" Willow indicated the fight that was still going on.

"They'll be fine. And we don't have time! Hurry!"

Buffy disappeared between the crates again and Willow quickly followed, taking care to point the crossbow at the ground while she

ran. They came out of the narrow passage and Buffy led her across the open docks leading away from the frigate, actually. Willow wondered what Faith would be doing out this way. Maybe she had run away when the spell failed and was being controlled by Oranstone, and Buffy had been chasing her. Even when they reached her, the young practicing witch wasn't sure what she could do to reinforce the protection spell without any supplies.

Buffy didn't say anything to her as they ran.

"Where is she?" Willow finally asked.

"She was right around that corner." She pointed to the other side of a group of large cargo containers.

They rounded the corner and Willow stopped right beside Buffy, but did not see Faith anywhere.

"Where is she?" she asked again and looked at Buffy. The Slayer was glaring at her with her green eyes. Her expression sent a chill down Willow's back. "Buffy?"

Buffy's hand shot out and clamped around her neck and she gagged as she was slammed against the side of the container. She had dropped the crossbow from the impact and now clawed at the hand strangling her.

"Buffy!" Willow managed to choke out.

Her best friend looked at her with deathly cool eyes. "Now, you will tell me what kind of spell you have on *my* Slayer?"

* * * *

"Giles!"

Giles, Angel, and Xander looked up in surprise to see the two Slayers running towards them. At their feet were the last of Oran's demon henchmen.

"Buffy," Angel exclaimed.

"What's wrong?" Giles asked, as they reached them.

Buffy took a quick look around. "Where's Willow?" she and Xander asked at the same time. Xander had been looking for his childhood friend also.

"She was right here," Angel said. "She was standing just over there."

"What's happened?" Giles asked.

"Oranstone was that tall vampire at the diner. She knows about the protection spell and, I don't know how, but she knows Willow was the one who casted it," Buffy quickly explained going over to where Willow had been standing. She saw the narrow passage between the crates. "I think she already has her."

"We need to go after them," Xander was already moving.

"No. Faith and I will go after them. I need you to watch the freighter, the Slayer Vampire is on board. If you see her leave don't go after her, just come get us."

"Buff--"

Buffy cut Xander off. "We don't have time to argue, please, Xander. I promised Oz I wouldn't let anything happen to her. We'll get her back!" She looked at Faith.

"I'll go this way," the brunette said and started running.

"Be careful," Buffy told the others and disappeared between the crates.

* * * *

"Oranstine!" Willow gasped.

"Please to meet you, child," the demon wearing her friend's appearance smiled briefly at her. Then sneered. "Now, how are you blocking my power?"

"What are you talking about?"

Oranstine tilted her head as she regarded the redhead. "Allow me to repeat myself." She slammed Willow against the container again, the back of her head making a ringing sound on the metal surface.

Willow closed her eyes against the pain but still saw stars dancing under her eyelids. When she opened her eyes several seconds later, she saw Buffy's face smirking at her. She inched her hand to Giles' weapon bag still hanging from her shoulder.

Oranstine didn't take her eyes off hers, but said, "Don't." Willow let her hand drop away from the bag.

The demon said, "If you do not tell me about this spell, I will just take the chance that your death will break it for me, witch."

The throbbing in her head lessened so that Willow was no longer clenching her teeth. She said, "I'm not really a witch."

"Is that right? You honestly do not realize the power you exude?" Oranstine seemed to find this amusing. "The potential you have. It's a shame you will not get the chance to explore your powers more fully."

Willow closed her eyes again, so that she would not see her friend's face saying these things, promising her death. The voice still sounded like Buffy's but not the tone the demon was using, so it was easier to pretend that this creature did not look like her best friend. She felt its hot breath on her cheek as it leaned closer to her.

"If you really are as naive as you say, then I believe I already know what kind of spell an amateur witch, like yourself, would use. Which means I have no need of you, dead or alive."

The hand on her neck adjusted so it was cupped under her chin and she felt the demon's other hand on top of her head. She realized it was going to snap her neck. Just like Ms. Calendar, Willow thought, with dread and a tear rolled out from under her eyelid.

"NO!"

Willow was thrown to the concrete, some of the wind getting knocked out of her. She shook her head and opened her eyes to a bizarre sight.

Buffy, the real Buffy, was fighting. . . well, herself. Dazed, Willow struggled to get to her feet as she watched the two Buffys trading blows. One of the Buffys had an enraged look on her face as her fists battered the other Buffy.

Then that Buffy shouted, "Willow, run!"

Which was great advice, and the redhead took off away from the mirror brawl, securing the weapon bag on her shoulder. She saw Faith running towards them from that direction. She was armed with a machete.

"Oh, shit!" Faith said, as she stopped next to Willow. "Which one is B?"

Willow looked back at the fight, but she could no longer tell which was the Buffy who told her to run. They were identical, even down to the cut above Buffy's brow. "I don't know."

"Damn. I guess we do this the old-fashioned way. Do you have a coin? We can flip heads or tails."

"What!?"

"Just kiddin'. Get back to the others, we'll handle this."

Faith started forward again, leaving Willow behind. She wanted to protest. The Slayer looked over her shoulder. "Make sure Xander doesn't do anything stupid."

Reluctantly, Willow ran away.

Faith was about twenty feet away from the fight when one Buffy slammed a hard fist into the other Buffy's stomach, making her double over, then grabbed that Buffy by her jacket, swung her around, and launched her into the air. The airborne Buffy hit the concrete and rolled to a stop at Faith's feet. The brunette had the machete poised, ready to strike.

That Buffy looked up at her and saw the machete. "Faith!"

"Faith, kill her!" the other Buffy shouted. "That's Oranstine!"

Faith glanced at her then at the Buffy at her feet.

"You wouldn't kill me, Faith," that Buffy said. "Not after what you said to me in the shower."

A smile spread on the brunette's face. She reached down an open palm to the blonde Slayer and helped her to her feet. "You know, I was only joking when I said those things to you."

Buffy mocked a hurt expression. "Why you tease!" They laughed.

Their smiles faded when they turned their attention back to the Buffy Oranstone. She stood with the spiked club Buffy had dropped in one hand and Willow's crossbow in the other.

* * * *

"Shouldn't we be helping them?" Xander asked.

"You've already asked that question," Angel told him.

"No, no. What I said before was: 'do you think they need our help?' Okay? This is a totally different question."

"Xander," Giles spoke up. "I'm sure they'll find Willow. She couldn't have gone far." The Watcher managed to put as much confidence in his words as he could, hiding his own concern for the young redhead.

He was still holding the battle ax in his hand, hanging by his leg. They had moved away from the corpses of the inhumans to a better position to watch over the frigate. He resisted the urge to lean against the crate for the temptation to slide to the ground and sit was very strong in him right now. He had been awake now for nearly forty hours and the lack of sleep was finally catching up to him.

"At least we don't have to worry about anymore of Oran's thugs," Xander nodded toward the bodies littering the concrete behind them. He looked at Angel. "Which means you get to participate in the Slayer match after all. Three against one. Makes you almost feel sorry for the Slayer Vampire."

"Don't start feeling sorry for her just yet," Angel said.

Xander and Giles looked in the direction the vampire was looking. They saw a lone figure walking down the gangplank of the ship. From this distance, they could only make out that the figure had long hair and was wearing a jacket.

"Do we follow her?" Xander asked.

"We won't have to."

The figure stepped off the gangplank and marched in their direction.

* * * *

"This is not good," Buffy said. The Buffy Oranstone was pointing the crossbow at them.

"She can only hit one of us," Faith said.

"*That's* reassuring."

"Besides, she wants us alive." Faith narrowed her eyes at the demon. "Isn't that right?"

Buffy never imagined her face could look so evil as it smiled at them. "I would prefer to have both of you, but I guess I'm going to have to settle for just one."

"How are you at catching crossbow arrows," Buffy whispered to Faith, not taking her eyes off her demon reflection.

"Never tried it before."

"Me neither."

The demon continued. "And since Faith already has my mark, I guess you're the one that's going to die." She directed the crossbow at Buffy.

Buffy tensed. If the Slayer Vampire could catch bolts so can she.

"Wait!" Faith shouted. She took a step closer to Buffy. "There's still a way you can have both of us." She dropped her machete and pulled the leather pouch all the way out of her sweat shirt. "This is what's protecting me from your control. All you have to do is take it away from me."

Oranstone seemed to consider this for a moment. She jerked her head to the side. "Step away from her."

"Faith, what are you doing?" Buffy whispered.

Faith grinned at her, still looking at Oranstone. "I have no idea." She put her hand on the small of Buffy's back and they locked eyes.

"Watch your back," Buffy said.

"You know me."

Faith walked slowly away from the blonde slayer, her arms down at her sides. Oranstone stepped out into the open with her, keeping the crossbow trained on Buffy.

"Now take it off," the demon ordered.

Faith shook her head and smiled. "That's not how it works, Man-E-Faces. If you want me you're gonna have to take it from me."

"I'll kill her." Oranstone raised the crossbow an inch for emphasis.

Faith gave a shrugged. "Then kill her."

She didn't see Buffy's jaw dropping as she looked at her with wide eyes.

"But you might miss," Faith added quickly. "Buffy's pretty fast, you might not be able to hit her, and then you'll have to deal with both of us." Faith lifted the pouch once more. "Now, if you can get this away from me, I'll be in your control and then it will be you and me against Buffy."

Oranstone only took her eyes off Buffy just for a second to take in Faith's shit-eating grin.

"C'mon, whadda ya say?" Faith said.

Still looking at Buffy, the demon started to walk towards Faith.

"I'll take that as a `yes'," Faith said, tossing the leather pouch over her shoulder, so it hung down her back, and charged the demon.

Oranstone dropped the crossbow, focusing all her attention on Faith and charged the Slayer, still armed with the club.

As soon as the demon dropped the crossbow, Buffy was also running, but she knew immediately that she wasn't going to reach them before they clashed. And what happened next occurred so fast Buffy wasn't sure what happened, despite the fact that she had been looking directly at it.

Faith had leaped into the air at the last instant, and Oranstone launched herself to match her move. They collided in midair and the next instant Buffy was falling back to avoid Faith as she flew straight at her. As she hit the concrete, she watched the brunette slam against the side of the cargo container and flop limply to the ground.

"Faith!" Buffy cried, as she scrambled to her fellow Slayer.

She dropped to her knees and turned her onto her back. Faith let out a cry of anguish and Buffy gasped. There were three long bloody slashes running diagonally across her chest, starting from the top of her left breast, reaching to her right shoulder.

"Oh, my God!"

Buffy heard laughter behind her and looked over her shoulder and saw her demon reflection smiling at her. The spiked club was lying at its feet, broken in half, but there was blood painted on the long talons that had sprung from the demon's right hand. "If you want her to live you'll have to. . . ."

Oranstone faltered, a look of confusion crossing her features and she looked down and noticed the handle of the large hunting knife sticking out of the center of her chest. The knife Faith had slipped out of Buffy's waistband and kept hidden along the inside of her forearm. With a stunned expression, Oranstone dropped to her knees. She looked up at the Slayers.

"Well done, my child," the demon said, smiling weakly. "But now, it looks like you are going to die after all."

"I got her!" Faith managed to say through her pain. "I got her, B!"

"Yeah, you did." Tears were suddenly filling Buffy's eyes as she cradled the dying Slayer in her lap.

"Tell Giles . . . I did good." Faith coughed and blood came out of her mouth and dripped down the side of her cheek.

"He'll be so proud of you," Buffy said.

"Looks like you . . . and Angel . . . are gonna have to deal with . . . fang-girl without me."

"No."

More laughter made Buffy look at the demon again and her anger flared as she watched the demon laugh at them. Green blood was flowing steadily from around the knife in its chest but it wasn't dead yet.

"I'm gonna finish what Faith started, you--" Buffy stopped and just stared at Oranstone for a couple of seconds. Then she looked down at Faith again. She saw the leather strap still around the brunette's neck. Buffy grabbed it and pulled the leather pouch out from under her. Buffy glanced at the demon again, still alive, then the pouch. She yanked the pouch and snapped the leather strap from Faith's neck.

Almost immediately, Faith's fatal wounds stopped bleeding and slowly began to mend themselves.

"Thank God," Buffy breathed. She looked over her shoulder again and saw that the dying demon was no longer laughing. "As long as you're alive, she can't die."

Buffy saw her own eyes glaring back at her. Oranstone said, in Buffy's voice, "An excellent idea. . . . child. But you . . . did overlook one minor detail." The demon was getting weaker but its eyes flashed a luminous green.

Buffy gagged as her air passage was suddenly closed off. She looked down and saw Faith, the brunette's hand wrapped around her throat, and her eyes were lit up with the same green brightness as the demon's. The slashes in her chest were still healing themselves but they were still gaping wounds.

"F--" Buffy tried to say, but the grip tightened around her neck and she started to feel her strength leave her.

Oranstone was laughing again, but it was more labored now. "You now have a choice, Slayer."

Buffy tried to pry Faith's hand off her throat but the brunette grabbed her wrist with her free hand and pinned it to the concrete as she forced Buffy down. Soon Faith was straddled across the blonde Slayer, looking down at her with those glowing green eyes, a sneer on her face. No doubt matching Oranstone's expression. But Buffy's other hand was still free, the one she had been holding the leather pouch in, which she realized she had dropped. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw it laying about three feet away from her and she reached for

it, the tips of her fingers just brushing against the leather.

Oranstine continued. "What will it be, Slayer? Will you save yourself and let your friend die. . . or will you let your friend live and kill you instead?"

Buffy strained harder to grab the pouch, but she couldn't do more than touch it with her fingertips.

"Yes," Oranstine said, humor in her voice. "Reach for it."

* * * *

"It is her," Giles breathed.

The young vampire had entered the mouth of the canyon created by the large crates and was striding purposefully in their direction.

"The Slayer Vampire?" Xander asked.

"Yes."

"Giles!"

The three of them turned at the sound of Willow's voice and saw the redhead running towards them. Her face took on a mask of disgust as she weaved her way through the inhuman bodies littered across the ground. Xander rushed to her and gave her a huge hug, nearly lifting her feet off the ground.

"Will! I'm so glad you're alive!"

Willow made a gagging sound under his strong embrace and he quickly released her.

"Where're Buffy and Faith?" Giles asked, though obviously relieved that she was alive, as well.

"They're fighting Oranstine, right now. It was freaky! Oranstine was disguised as Buffy, she looked exactly like her." Willow looked past the three men. "Uh, who's that?"

"I call her trouble," Angel said, the only one who had not taken his eyes off the approaching Slayer Vampire. "Giles, get them out of here. Now!"

The vampire took a few steps forward readying himself to face the creature. The Slayer Vampire was close enough so that they were able to see her clearly now.

The young vampire stopped just a few feet in front of Angel and glared at him. "Normally I'd welcome the chance for a quick meal, but the master is calling me now, and even though I don't want to, I have to go to her. So back off!" The last she said with a growl.

Angel didn't budge and there was anger in his eyes. "You're the one who hurt Buffy."

She smiled at him. "What? Are you Buffy's boyfriend? Well, I'll be

sure to give her my condolences over your death. And I'll give her a kiss for you, too."

With that, she roared, her fangs springing forth, and leaped at him. Angel roared also, his vampire features sliding into place, and leaped forward as well. The two vampires collided and the Slayer Vampire went sailing through the air and slammed into the wall of crates. She hit hard and fell to the concrete but quickly sprang to her feet. There was a surprised look on her face.

"A vampire!" A wicked grin formed around her fangs. "Why didn't I smell it before?"

Angel was facing her, ready for another attack.

"Angel!"

Angel looked over his shoulder and caught the battle ax Giles threw to him. The Slayer Vampire thought this was amusing.

"Good idea," she said. "You're definitely gonna need that."

* * * *

Darkness was starting to creep around the edges of her vision but the bright green coming from Faith's eyes pierced through. Buffy knew if she didn't do something, like right now, she was going to lose consciousness and she would not be waking up.

She wasn't sure how, but she managed to get her nails into the leather of the pouch and dragged it just a centimeter closer to her, which was enough to get a better hold on it. She closed her fist around it and was about to slam it against the top of Faith's hand. She stopped herself at the last instant. Through her blurring vision she could still see that the slashes had not yet closed completely, if she reestablished the protection spell they would surely start bleeding again.

"What's the matter, Slayer," she heard Oranstone say. Buffy wished she would lose her appearance or at least change into someone else. "Aren't you . . . going to save yourself?"

She had the pouch just hovering over Faith's hand, and it was getting heavier and heavier with each passing second. Buffy tightened her grip around it so it wouldn't slip out of her hand, but even that was now a chore. She was no longer able to struggle to free her other hand, that was pinned to the concrete, but Faith did not let it go. Buffy was trying to keep her eyelids from closing but they were also too heavy and she succeeded in only keeping them partially opened.

"It. . . looks like it's. . . all over for you," she heard Oranstone.

A flash of anger coursed through the Slayer, but in her weakened condition it only allowed her to open her eyes again. But it was enough. She saw Faith's wounds were just fading scars now. Miraculously, she was still holding the pouch and she willed her hand to move. Her hand just fell limply and the leather pouch landed on top of Faith's hand just as darkness finally filled her vision.

When Buffy opened her eyes again, she saw Faith falling back, the green light disappearing from her eyes and the brunette landed next to her, one leg still across her lower body. Savage coughs shook Buffy's entire body as her lungs clawed desperately for air.

Unable to move, Buffy let her head fall to the side and saw Faith lying there with her eyes closed.

"F. . . .th." Buffy could barely hear her own voice. < Faith >

Faith's eyes fluttered and opened. She was looking directly at Buffy but didn't seem aware of what she was seeing. Then she lifted her head and her eyes focused.

"Buffy?" she said, softly.

Buffy managed a smile. Faith raised herself to her knees and Buffy thought that was really unfair. Here she was with a nearly crushed windpipe and Faith was acting like a slow morning person.

"Are you all right, B?"

"y. . . .," she tried to say. < yeah >

"Oh, man." Faith helped her to a sitting position and had to hold onto her to keep the blonde from collapsing. "I'm sorry, B. I didn't mean to do that. I didn't have any control. She was inside my head. I could hear her."

Buffy put a weak hand on her shoulder. ". . .on't orry. . . 'out 'at," she said. < Don't worry about that >

Red, abrasive bruising was forming around Buffy's neck in the shape of Faith's hand. She rubbed her hand tentatively against her throat. It was hurting her just to breath, but hopefully that, usually, reliable Slayer healing will start to work.

She turned her gaze to where she last saw the demon. Oranstone was now sitting, slumped on the concrete looking very weak. She was still wearing Buffy's appearance and the Slayer did not want to admit just how disturbing it was to see herself, right in front of her, with a large knife sticking out of her chest. However, the green blood still flowing from the wound helped to dispel the surreal image. Then her eyes fell on the leather pouch on the concrete next to her leg. She picked it up and gave it to Faith. It didn't seem like Oranstone had the strength left to take control of Faith again, but she wasn't about to bet what little life she had left on it.

"Congratulations, my children," Oranstone sputtered, and her lips were damped with blood. "You are very. . . .resourceful indeed. You won. After four centuries. . . .it's finally my time. . . .to die."

"Oh, stop being so dramatic," a voice cut through the night.

Buffy, Faith, and Oranstone turned their heads in the direction the voice came from. A silhouette of a person wearing a long trench coat

was walking towards them.

"I truly hate the way you're always posturing," the silhouette said. It was a female voice. "I don't remember you being this bad when we were together."

The person was clearly visible now and she was standing to one side between the Slayers and the demon. Buffy's mouth dropped again as she recognized the woman.

The woman looked at her. The woman she had met last night in Angel's mansion. The shapeshifter whom they thought was Oranstone. The Lady Oranstone saw Buffy's expression and smiled at her.

"Hello, Buffy," she said. "It's nice to see you again."

Buffy tried to say, "F. . . me. . ." < you know what she said >

End of Part Seventeen

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Eighteen

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"Now who the hell is this?" Faith asked.

Buffy couldn't say anything, and not just because of her injured throat. She just stared unbelievably at the woman.

The demon reflection of Buffy looked as surprised as the real one as it too gazed at the woman. "You?! What are you . . . doing here?"

The woman looked back at Buffy and smiled knowingly. "I was visiting a friend."

"This is none of your . . . concern," the demon said.

The woman looked at the demon again. "Oh, I think it is, my dear. When the humans *and* the Slayers start seeing me as a threat because of your nefarious projects, it concerns me a great deal. I cannot move around freely while you make life difficult for the both of us."

Since she couldn't shout, Buffy had resorted to raising her hand as if she were in class. "Excuse us," Faith said for her.

The demon and the woman turned to the Slayers. "Yes?" the woman asked.

"Twins?" Buffy managed to say in a hushed voice.

The woman considered that for a moment. "You could say that." Seeing Buffy's expression she continued. "I apologize, Slayer. I told you, you had no idea what you were dealing with. And I *was* telling the truth when I said I was here to see Angel. But I'm afraid I did lie when I told you the Order of Taraka took my head." She paused for a moment. "Oh, they did take my head, but . . . you see I didn't actually grow a new head. I grew a new body."

The Slayers just stared, dumbfounded expressions on their faces.

The woman nodded to the demon on the ground. " *She's* the one who grew a new head."

"So, you're Oranstone, too?" Faith said.

The woman started to walk toward the Slayers. "Yes. But I'm not your enemy, as I told Buffy last night.

"How?" Buffy asked.

"I knew long ago that I could not die unless both my heart and my head were removed, so I wasn't concerned when the Order of Taraka killed me. They only wanted my head. But imagine my surprise when my head did not die and I was not resurrected in my own body again, that I grew a totally new body instead." She stopped just a few feet away from them and glanced over her shoulder at the demon. "But that does not compare to my shock when I discovered that my body did not die either."

"There are two Oranstones," Faith stated.

"Please, call me Oran."

Faith sneered at her. "So she's not going to die?" She nodded to the demon on the ground, still looking like it was dying.

"No," Oran said. "In about a day or two she'll be completely regenerated."

Faith's and Buffy's eyes fell on the machete that was lying on the ground just beside Oran's feet. Oran bent down to retrieve it. Faith glared at the woman.

"So you're here to save `yourself', huh?"

Oran met the Slayers' eyes calmly. "No, I am not."

She turned around and started to walk back to the Buffy Oranstone. The demon watched her approach.

"What are. . . you going to do . . . with that?" it asked.

"My dear, Oranstone," Oran said. "I'm afraid the novelty of the `Two-Faced Demon' has lost its charm on me. I very much prefer being an only child."

Oran was standing right next to Oranstone now, the machete still hanging by her side.

"You can't kill me!" Oranstone shouted, blood dripping from its lip. "If I die, you die!"

Oran sighed deeply. "That argument is also very old. Two hundred years ago that may have been true, your heart was still a part of me, even though you got to carry it." She put her free hand over her chest. "But, I've been with my *own* heart for two hundred years now. I think I'll survive without *yours*."

"Wait!" Oranstine shouted.

The demon's body shimmered and the form of Buffy it was wearing melted away, revealing its true, faceless, self. It was still wearing the long dark robe when Faith had first met the demon, the hood down and the lapels hanging open to reveal the hunting knife piercing the center of the large tattoo on its chest. Oranstine's skin was a stone gray and its body was shaped like a human body. But its face was devoid of any features. At least any exterior features. There was a thin gray membrane of transparent skin pulled over its entire head with no openings. Underneath, the Slayers were able to see the demon's true face. Two round black spheres swirling in the eyesockets of its skull, no nose, and just a small opening that moved when it spoke.

"I am you!" the demon shouted.

Oran raised the blade over her head. "And I really do detest myself."

With that, she brought the blade down and smoothly separated the demon's head from its shoulders. Buffy made sure not to watch the head as it tumbled across the concrete, but she was still able to hear it bouncing along. She usually didn't shy away from such things, but the way she was feeling right now, she wasn't sure if she could keep herself from throwing up.

"Is she dead now?" Faith asked.

Oran was still looking down at her former body. She dropped the machete. "Yes. Finally," she said, in a soft voice. She put a hand to her chest again, as if to assure herself that her heart was still beating. Sighing, she smiled.

Buffy turned to Faith. "And you're still alive, too." Buffy was able to make each word understandable.

"Which means, so is fang-girl." Faith looked down at the small leather pouch in her hand. "I guess I don't need this anymore." She was about drop it when she stopped herself and looked at Oran. Buffy knew what she was thinking.

Oran saw their expressions. "Do not worry, Slayer. When I --when we-- were `separated,' Oranstine got to keep the tattoo."

"But you both can shapeshift," Buffy stated.

"That is our natural ability. I acquired the tattoo about a hundred years before I was . . . spliced."

Faith pulled down the tattered sweatshirt from her shoulder revealing her left arm. The tattoo was no longer there. She let the pouch fall to the ground.

"How long did you know Oranstine was here?" Buffy was asking Oran.

"As soon as I arrived. Back at Angel's I told you that."

"But you didn't tell us who it was," she accused.

Oran smiled at her. "No I didn't." She saw the look Buffy gave her. "Come now, Buffy. I'm still a demon. You know, evil and all. Besides, didn't you have more fun this way?"

"Yeah, barrels of funnies," she replied, disdainfully.

Faith helped Buffy to her feet even though the brunette was the one covered in blood. "So, what are your plans now?" Buffy asked.

Oran nodded down to the demon corpse. "I'll dispose of that." She looked at Buffy again. "And there is that little matter of our bargain. I did promise to leave Sunnydale and didn't."

"Enlight of things, I think we can overlook it this time. But after the funeral you will be leaving?"

Oran smiled pleasantly. "Of course. Say good-bye to Angel for me?"

Buffy didn't respond and turned away.

"We should be getting back to the others," Faith said. "We're not done yet."

Buffy moaned as they started walking away. She paused to pick up the crossbow Oranstone had dropped, its bolt was still loaded. Her whole body, which had not completely healed from her injuries this morning, was once again aching with those and new ones. "That's easy for you to say, you're the one who just had the free power-up."

"You try getting your chest sliced open and tell me if it would have been worth it?" Faith replied.

Before Buffy could say anything they saw Xander running towards them.

"Buffy!" he shouted. He stopped when he was close enough to see Faith more clearly. And all the blood. "Faith. Are you--"

"Don't worry, it's not-- Well it *is* mine, but I'm all right."

"Xander," Buffy said to get his attention.

Xander looked at the blonde. A forlorn look on his face. He opened his mouth but couldn't say anything. Buffy hadn't seen him like this since the time he had told her Willow was in a coma.

"What is it?" Buffy said, dreadfully.

"It's Angel."

* * * *

Buffy was no longer feeling the pain from her injuries and actually beat Faith and Xander back to where he had left them. Her heart leaped into her throat when she saw Giles and Willow on their knees around Angel who was lying on his back on the concrete.

"Angel!" Buffy cried.

Giles and Willow saw her coming and her Watcher moved away and Buffy dropped to her knees the instant he left the spot. Angel's face was a mask of pain and he looked up at her with weak eyes. Giles' tweed jacket was bundled up and Willow was pressing it against the side of Angel's neck. Buffy couldn't see how bad it was but there was a puddle of blood still spreading on the concrete under him.

"Bad?" Buffy asked Willow.

The redhead looked at her with sorrowful eyes. "It's really bad."

"I'll live," Angel said in a weak voice. "I can't die from this."

"But you haven't fed all day. You've lost a lot of blood," Buffy told him.

"I can manage." He tried to sit up.

Buffy put a hand on his shoulder and easily kept him down. "What the hell are you doing? You might not die, but if you do that again I'll kill you myself!"

Angel stopped struggling and looked up at her. "You're hurt." He raised a hand to her neck. She grabbed it and held it in hers.

"It's nothing. I'll live through this." She looked at Willow. "What did she do?"

"She bit him." Willow's face blanched as she talked, seeing it again in her mind. "She was just ripping into him, she wasn't even feeding. She said that her master was calling her."

"And you just had to get in her way, huh?" Buffy said, trying to be stern with him.

"But Angel was able to get in a few good licks, wasn't he," Faith asked. "Softened her up a little for us?"

"She went totally 'Tyson' on him," Xander said without humor.

"He only managed to keep her at bay for a couple of minutes until she closed on him," Giles offered. Buffy saw he was absently wiping blood off his hands with a handkerchief.

"We wanted to help," Willow said, and Buffy gave her an alarmed look.

"But Angel wouldn't let us," Xander added.

Buffy looked down at him again. She was stroking her hand through his black hair. "He was right. She would have killed you all."

"Hey, not that I'm not glad to see you all alive, but why *didn't* she kill all of you?" Faith asked.

"I don't know," Giles said. "It was in the middle of, uh, well--" He indicated the wound on Angel's neck. "When she suddenly stopped. She let him go and just ran back to the boat."

Buffy looked at Faith. "Oranstone must've been too weak to keep contact with her."

"So, Oran's dead?" Angel asked.

"Yeah, well, it's kinda complicated. I'll explain everything later."

"Uh, guys," Xander said. "I think our girl has decided she no longer wants to keep our company."

They looked to where he was pointing and they saw a couple of small figures who had untethered the thick ropes tying the ship to the dock and walk up the gangplank. Soon they were pulling it in.

"She's leaving," Willow said.

"We have to stop her," Faith said.

"You guys look after him," Buffy told the others. "Try to get him as far away from here as possible, I don't want any of you getting in the cross-fire."

She was about to stand when Giles grabbed her arm. "Buffy, you might as well let her go. It's too dangerous to go after her."

"What?" Faith exclaimed.

"Giles, this may be our only chance to stop her," Buffy said. "And Wallace is on that ship."

"Wallace? Her Watcher is still alive? That vampire in the diner, uh, or I should say, Oranstone, told us he was dead."

"What can I say, Giles? She lied. Evil demons do do that sometimes. We have to at least try to save him. She wants to turn him into a vampire, it's why she wanted Oranstone dead, she wouldn't let her turn him. And now that she's free it's probably the first thing she's gonna do."

"A Slayer and Watcher vampire team, how scary does that sound?" Xander said.

"But Faith . . . " Giles said, noticing all the blood on the brunette.

"I'm completely healed," she reassured him. "I traded in all my health points before Oranstone kicked."

Giles looked from one Slayer to the other, then he looked out to where the frigate was preparing to leave. He raised his eyes to his Slayers again. "Both of you be careful. If anything were to happen to either--"

"We know," Faith cut in. "You'll take away our TV privileges for a

week. C'mon, B, let's move."

Buffy picked up the crossbow from where she had dropped it and Faith grabbed up the battle ax that was lying several feet from Angel. It was nearly broken in half. She ripped the halves apart and let the double bladed ax head fall to the ground and tested her grip on the two-foot long stake the handle made.

Together, the Slayers took off in a run. Faith quickly realized that Buffy was starting to fall behind. She slowed down just enough for the blonde to keep pace. This was not good, she thought. It seemed like even with all the healing Buffy had done throughout the day, that she was right back where she was when she woke up in the library. At least she was still able to move. Probably just the adrenaline still coursing through her Slayer metabolism. Faith prayed it would last long enough to deal with the Slayer Vampire.

The frigate was just raising its anchor as they came along side it and it slowly began to steam forward. On the top deck, standing by the railing, the Slayer Vampire looked down at them and smiled.

"Sorry," she called down to them. "But you just missed the boat. But by all means, if you think you can make the jump up here, give it a shot."

Buffy and Faith jogged along side to keep pace with it. It was slow in gathering speed but would soon pull away from the dock. The space between the ship and the dock was wider than Faith would have been able to clear, and she was certain Buffy couldn't make that jump.

"What's the matter?" Faith shouted. "I thought you were a tough girl. You're not afraid of two weak Slayers are you?"

"I thought you weren't going to leave without tasting the blood of a Slayer?" Buffy put in.

"When I was human, Wallace taught me the value of patience," the vampire said. "I think it's time I started taking his advice more often. And now that I'm a vampire, I have all the time in the world. I can even wait for the next Slayers to be called if I wanted."

"But with Wallace still alive, you know we'll come after you," this from Buffy.

"If that's what you're worried about." The Slayer Vampire looked over her shoulder. "C'mon out. Show the little girls our arrangement."

Faith and Buffy were running faster now, but not flat out, to keep up with the boat and Buffy stumbled when she saw Wallace escorted to the railing by the trench-coat demon, but he was no longer tied up.

The Slayer Vampire said, "I told the Tarakans that Oranstone was dead. I knew the instant it happened. Well done, by the way. I knew you could do it. And the bounty died with her, but they were good enough to offer us a ride out of the country."

"Wallace jump!" Buffy shouted.

"Thank you for your concern," Wallace said, and smiled at them. "But I've decided to stay with *my* Slayer if you don't mind."

"But--" Buffy began, then realization sank in with a sickening feel to her stomach. "No."

Wallace let his vampire features slide over his face and his fangs punctuated his smile.

"Bitch!" Faith shouted. "I'm gonna cut off your head!"

"But you didn't have time to change him!" Buffy shouted, trying to deny what her eyes were showing her.

"You have Faith to thank for that, actually," the vampire said. "Her escape distracted the master long enough for me to spend plenty of quality time with my Watcher. And since I wasn't allowed to play with you two, I had to find other ways to pass the time. It wasn't too hard keeping it a secret. You two fell for it."

The Slayer Vampire turned to the trench-coat demon. "Let's get out of here. Sunnydale is suddenly a very boring place."

With a nod, the demon turned and walked out of sight, heading for the main control cabin.

"There's no need to give up all hope," she said to them. "I might get tired of waiting and come back for both of you." She shrugged. "You never know."

Buffy picked up speed and got ahead of the frigate. Then she stopped and swung the crossbow up in her hands, aiming for the Slayer Vampire. The vampire watched this with little concern. Buffy kept her sights centered on her as the ship began to pass her by and Faith stopped at her side.

"You know that won't work against me, Buffy," the Slayer Vampire said, condescendingly. "I'll just catch it. And I wasn't even prepared the first time." She raised her arms out from her sides, providing a clear target at her heart. "But if you feel like you got something to prove, be my guest."

"Thanks," Buffy said, and adjusted her aim slightly and let the arrow fly.

The vampire's eyes went wide as she realized the bolt wasn't coming at her. She lunged for her Watcher, reaching out with her hand, but was just a split second too late to keep the shaft from piercing his heart. Wallace stumbled a step back from the impact and stared blankly down at his chest. Then his eyes met his Slayer's and he started to fall back to the deck.

"NOOOO!" the Slayer Vampire screamed as she fell to the deck with him, out of Buffy's and Faith's sight. They heard the sound of Wallace combusting into ashes a second later.

Buffy lowered the empty crossbow as she and Faith watched the frigate pass by. It angled away from the dock and was gaining speed. The

Slayer Vampire remained out of sight.

"Damn," Buffy muttered.

"It was a nice try, B," Faith offered. "We'll just have to get her next time." Buffy's mood didn't change. "Hey, look on the bright side. We got rid of a bunch of vampires and one powerful demon, who wanted to make more chicks like her." She pointed to the frigate. "Not to mention saving me from becoming her servant." Still no reaction. "C'mon, B! It was a good night for the good guys! Even Darth Vader got away in the first movie."

Buffy finally looked at her and smiled half-heartedly. "Yeah. I guess. We better get back to the others. I'm worried about Angel."

They turned their back on the departing frigate. Faith unzipped her sweat shirt, grimacing at all the blood on it and herself. "And I definitely need another shower. This--"

They were stopped in their tracks as a titanic roar ripped through the night and pounded their eardrums. Their eyes were locked on the frigate again and they saw the Slayer Vampire stand up, the bright yellow glow in her eyes. Then she started to run straight for the Slayers, never mind that there was a sixty foot gap of water between the ship and the dock. She didn't even hesitate, never lost any speed, as she stepped up onto the top rail at the rear of the boat, and launched herself into the air. As she arced downwards, it seemed like she was going to come up just short of the dock, but then she landed, both feet slamming right on the edge.

Buffy and Faith could only stare as the creature stood up straight again and locked her gaze on them. She was only twenty feet away and they saw the tears streaming down her face, from her yellow eyes. Even though she did not have any visible vampire features other than the fangs, the rage chiseled on her face was more frightening than any vampire Buffy could remember.

"Okay, B," Faith said, not taking her eyes off the vampire. "Now you did it. Now she's really pissed."

End of Part Eighteen

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Nineteen

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The three Slayers just stood there in silence. It was only for a few seconds, but it seemed to stretch for eternity. Faith and Buffy gazed at the Slayer Vampire as the creature returned it, the hatred multiplied several times over. Tears stained the vampire's cheeks and Buffy realized that Noriko Amano had really loved her Watcher when she had been a human. She recalled how the vampire referred to the Watcher by his last name. No 'Mr.' before Wallace. The same way Buffy and the others called Giles just Giles. The demon that took over Noriko when she was turned into a vampire remembered everything from her life, as well as the love she held for the only father figure she had.

And right now that love drove the Slayer Vampire towards one goal.

Revenge.

Behind the vampire, the frigate continued on its way fading into the night of the sea. If the remaining Tarakans on board knew their passenger had jumped ship they must not feel obligated to return for her. Just as well, Buffy thought. They were about to have their hands full with just her.

Beside her, Faith adjusted her hold on the broken ax handle. All Buffy had was the empty crossbow. She let it drop and it clattered on the concrete.

The noise broke the silence and sent the Slayer Vampire in motion. She sprang forward, running directly towards Buffy, as if she didn't even notice Faith standing there.

The brunette saw this too and took advantage, stepping into the vampire's path and met the creature with a round kick to its head. But the vampire suddenly reacted to the attack and ducked smoothly underneath Faith's leg and she was now standing between the two human Slayers, launching its own attack at Buffy. Buffy deflected its lightning fast punches aimed at her chest and head, and Faith came at it from behind. Without looking back, the Slayer Vampire blocked Faith's right hook with a back elbow, giving Buffy the opening to counterattack. The vamp ducked as Faith swung the handle, at the same time blocking Buffy's front kick. She stood back up to forearm block Buffy's right cross and side stepped Faith's front kick from behind.

No matter how the two Slayers attacked the vampire, she succeeded in blocking all their strikes, but she never took her focus off Buffy. The blonde was hard pressed warding off the vampire's attacks on her, and the creature wasn't even striking back at Faith, just defending against the other Slayer. Buffy found herself shuffling back as the vamp's efforts increased.

Buffy began to retaliate with a punching combination, but the Slayer Vampire grabbed her wrist on the first punch, twisting it, causing her to step off balance, and snapped a round kick to her face. She held onto Buffy and without lowering her leg, sent a back-kick at Faith, who blocked it with the ax handle. Then she sent the leg forward again this time kicking Buffy across the stomach, and the Slayer fell to her knees. Now she did release Buffy and went into a half-spinning kick that knocked Faith's stake out of her hand as the brunette swung it at her. The vampire quickly stepped into a side kick that slammed into Faith's chest and sent the Slayer off her feet. Faith hit the ground and flopped back on her stomach, the wind knocked out of her.

Momentarily free of both opponents, the vampire turned her attention back to Buffy, her main target. The blonde Slayer was trying to rise from her knees when the vamp kicked at her face. Buffy brought her forearms up to block the kick but the vampire followed with a hammer fist that hit her just below the back of the neck. The blow dazed her, almost falling forward, and the vamp's next kick did hit her in the face, knocking her on her back.

Before the Slayer Vampire could press her attack, Faith jumped on the creature's back, wrapping her arms around its neck. Buffy rolled away and began to pull herself up, forcing her body to move with the speed

she knew she did not have. The vampire immediately drove an elbow back into Faith's midsection, slammed the back of her head into Faith's face, and flipped the brunette over onto the concrete at its feet. She drove a fist straight down at Faith's head and the Slayer barely dodged the blow and a small explosion of concrete erupted under the fist. Still on her back, Faith lashed out with a kick that connected with the vampire's face and it stumbled a couple of steps back, as Faith kicked herself to her feet. She was facing the vampire again when it came at her with an assault of kicks and punches.

Buffy was on her feet again, and began circling the fight since Faith's back was closest to her. Her fellow Slayer seemed to be holding her own for the moment, but she knew it would not last. Noriko was a very technical fighter, but, at the same time, was not afraid to improvise, she was just unfamiliar with Faith's streetfighting style. And the brunette was taking total advantage of it. She managed to score a series of punches and backhands that made the vampire stagger back again, farther from Buffy. The vamp regained her balance just as Faith pressed her attack, and blocked every strike this time, retaliating with a front kick that hit the brunette in the stomach. The creature followed through with an inside crescent-kick that spun the Slayer in place, then continued into a spinning heel kick. But Faith ducked that kick then immediately threw herself into a handstand back flip sending both feet up against the Slayer Vampire's chin. Faith landed on her feet again just as the vampire landed on her back, but it quickly scrambled to its feet. Just in time to take Buffy's flying kick in the chest.

This sent the vampire flying and she hit the dock hard, rolling into a semi-controlled tumble. She succeeded in using the momentum to spring back to her feet but her back slammed against a nearby wooden crate.

Buffy and Faith were in hot pursuit. Buffy reached the creature first and it blocked her punches, countering with a palm strike to her chin. The vampire blocked Faith's round kick, as it sent a front kick into Buffy's midsection, then used the same leg to kick the side of Faith's supporting leg. Buffy fell to the ground as Faith's knee buckled. Grabbing her by her brown hair the Slayer Vampire smashed a hard knee into her face.

The vampire let Faith fall and stalked Buffy again. The blonde Slayer was halfway to her feet when she was grabbed by her bruised neck, and the vamp lifted her to her feet. Before she could do anything, a powerful fist hit her in the face and when she opened her eyes again she was lying on her back, looking up as the vampire approached her. A few yards behind the creature she saw a dazed Faith struggling to her knees. Buffy rolled onto her stomach and tried to push herself off the concrete, but the vampire reached her and kicked her in the midsection, sending the Slayer rolling across the ground.

Hugging her stomach, trying to regain the wind that was knocked out of her, Buffy willed her aching body to move. She hadn't even made it to her knees before the vampire reached down and grabbed her by the lapels of her jacket. She was suddenly looking into the Slayer Vampire's yellow eyes.

"I want to kill you so bad I can't contain myself," she sneered in her face.

She smashed Buffy in the face with a vicious headbutt, and the Slayer could have sworn she heard her nose breaking. The vampire was the only thing keeping her on her feet now, and she was only able to open her eyes halfway.

"But I think I'll allow you to live just a little longer," she said. "It's only fair. You took my Watcher, I'll take yours."

This allowed Buffy to open her eyes all the way, but she was still too weak to do much else.

"Don't worry," the vamp said. "I won't kill him. I'll make him *my* Watcher."

"NO!" Buffy screamed and threw a punch across the creature's face. It had no effect, there had been no power behind it.

The Slayer Vampire smiled at her and buried a fist into Buffy's stomach, making her gasp, then she shoved her hard. Buffy flew backwards and crashed into the side of a metal cargo container. She collapsed to a heap on the ground.

Her entire body felt like dead weight but she raised her head to look at the vampire.

"I'll also make sure your boyfriend is dead and I will kill the rest of your friends. Too bad you can't stop me. I'll see you later, Buffy."

Behind her, Buffy saw that Faith had finally got back to her feet and was running towards them, a little unsteady, but still able to fight. The Slayer Vampire started running to where they had left Giles and the others, and Buffy prayed they had already gotten out of there. It would buy them some time, at least.

Faith immediately gave chase but the vampire was much faster and she would not be able to catch her. The brunette came to the empty crossbow still lying on the ground and snatched it up without slowing down. She went into a running throw and flung the weapon like a Frisbee. At first, Buffy didn't think she was going to hit the creature, but then the crossbow slammed into the back of her legs and the bowhead tangled itself between them. The Slayer Vampire tripped and hit the concrete hard, the crossbow getting shattered in the process.

Faith had not stopped running and reached the vampire just as she was rising to her knees. She put all her strength behind the kick that hit the Slayer Vampire in the face. The creature staggered back from the impact and Faith wasted no time, unleashing a devastating punching combination, pummeling the vampire back towards a large wooden crate. Then the creature suddenly ducked under one of her right hooks, then blocked a left hook. She lashed out with a low kick against the side of Faith's legs and they were both swept out from under her, and as she fell sideways the Slayer Vampire slammed a hard fist into the Slayer's chest. The impact sent the brunette through the air and she hit the ground in a rough tumble. She came to a stop on her back gasping for air, clutching her chest.

She saw the vampire just standing there, glaring at her. Then the

creature wiped the blood trailing from her mouth with the back of her hand. Faith was amid the scattered remains of the crossbow and she quickly selected a piece that made an adequate stake. On her feet again, she rushed the vampire. She came in with a midlevel front kick following through with a downward stake strike. The vampire blocked the kick then caught her stake hand by the wrist. Faith immediately punched her across the face with her free left hand and the vamp released her. She tried another stake strike but it was deflected with a forearm and Faith quickly spun into a spinning backhand. The vampire ducked the swing and came up with round kick to her stomach, making Faith double over. She grabbed the Slayer by the back of her sweat shirt and slammed her into the wooden crate. Before Faith could recover, the Slayer Vampire grabbed her again and slammed her face first once more into the crate. This time she lost the stake. She kicked the brunette in the back of the knee causing it to buckle. As she knelt in front of the crate the vampire slammed a knee against the back of her head, smashing her face into the wooden surface, cracking it.

Faith left a bloody smear on the cracked area as she fell limply to the ground.

Oh, my God, she's dead, Buffy thought as she labored her way toward the fight. She had just watched Faith fall and lay there unmoving. Buffy was only half running due to the pain throughout her body, but she was moving as fast as she could. But seeing her fellow Slayer fall sent a surge of adrenaline through her that allowed her to pick up a little more speed, but it would not be enough if Faith was already dead. She had retrieved the broken ax handle on the way and hoped Faith would keep her distracted long enough to sneak up behind her.

Now the creature turned to face her, its back to Faith's body. The blonde Slayer stopped. She was just ten feet from the Slayer Vampire and the creature looked at the battered Slayer.

"One down," she said.

"You're not gonna win," Buffy said, through clenched teeth.

"Do you think you can stop me? You can barely stand."

"I look worse than I feel."

"You look dead." The vampire took a step forward. "I just have to make it so. And I will have your Watcher."

Buffy glared back at the vampire. "As I said before, over my dead body." Buffy's eyes flickered. "Or should I say, over our dead bodies."

Behind the Slayer Vampire, Faith had stood up. Her face was scratched up from being slammed into the wooden surface, but they were all shallow cuts. However, there was blood flowing steadily from her nose. She raised her hand and was holding the stake she had dropped.

"Now that hurt," she said, and plunged the stake into the vampire's back before she could react.

The Slayer Vampire arched her back and roared in pain. Then she clutched her chest. She turned and swung a hard backhand across Faith's face that sent the Slayer spinning into the crate again and the brunette slid to the ground. Buffy charged forward as the vampire staggered.

"No!" the creature screamed. She swung a fist at the approaching Slayer.

Buffy blocked it with her free forearm then slammed the ax handle into the vampire's chest. Buffy let go and the vampire fell against the crate, clutching at the stake. Faith was sitting against the crate close by and watched as she sank to the ground. By the time she reached the ground, the Slayer Vampire's skin had darkened to a brownish gray and her flesh exploded in a cloud of ash, leaving behind a blackened skeleton. The skeleton just sat there.

After a still moment, Buffy walked over to Faith and slid down next to her, opposite of the skeleton. They both just stared off into space in front of them.

After a another moment, Buffy finally said, "So how ya doing, kid?"

"I think I'm still alive," Faith replied.

"That's good."

Faith nodded numbly. "You?"

"I guess I should be grateful to still be alive. But I know I'm gonna wish I was dead in the morning."

"I hear you."

Faith and Buffy just sat there in silence, trying to catch their breaths. Then Faith slowly reached a hand to the skeleton. With a flick of her finger the skeleton crumbled to dust.

End of Part Nineteen

A TALE OF SLAYERS Part Twenty

CHAPTER TWENTY

"I don't hear anything," Willow said.

"That's a good thing, right?" Xander said, softly, as he walked beside her.

"I hope so."

"Well, if there was noise that would mean that Buff and Faith were still fighting the Slayer Vamp." He glanced nervously over his shoulder in the direction they just came from. They were following the path the Slayers had taken when they chased off after the departing ship. "No noise means that the fight is over."

"Yeah," Willow agreed, trying to sound less worried as she fidgeted with the cross in her hand. "Or maybe there was no fight," she said,

hopefully. "Maybe she got away."

"Hey, yeah," Xander said. "But then why didn't they come back?"

"Uh," Willow's face fell. "Oh, maybe they were tired and they needed to take a break? They did look tired, didn't they?"

"Yeah," Xander said, but it was obvious he didn't believe that any more than she did. "But even if they did fight her, she wouldn't stand a chance against *two* Slayers."

"Right!" Willow put conviction behind those words. "She got her ass kicked!"

"I mean, who cares that she took down Angel in less time than most Tyson fights."

"Right!"

"Let's face it, when it comes to fighting Slayers, Angel is the expert in getting his ass kicked. Buffy, herself, kicked his ass when he was trying to awaken Acathla."

Willow nodded. "And, and when Kendra first met him, she knocked him around some."

"Yeah, I almost forgot about that. And Faith nearly killed him just a couple of months back." Xander scoffed. "When you think about it, Angel really isn't all that tough."

"Yeah," Willow agreed. "It's just that whole stoic, tough guy, imposing image he puts forth."

"It's the dark coats," Xander said.

"That too."

They fell silent. After a moment the worry returned to their expressions and they continued onward.

Giles had been very vocal when Xander had suggested that he should go check to see if Buffy and Faith were all right. He became even more vocal when Willow agreed and said she would go with Xander. Xander and the Watcher had managed to carry Angel back to the cars. The wound on his neck had almost stopped bleeding, but the vampire was still extremely weak. Giles had not been sure what would happen if he lost too much blood. Better not to find out. Maybe he feared that Angel would succumb to the blood need and go into a feeding frenzy, Xander thought.

It could be the reason he finally agreed to let them go after Faith and Buffy. It might be safer than staying with a starving vampire. And despite being three for three in getting Slayer-whipped, Xander had to admit that Angel could rumble with the meanest of demons. And the Slayer Vampire was definitely one of the meanest to come to Sunnydale. He just hoped Buffy and Faith could take her. He knew Buffy hadn't been completely healed from this morning, and she had taken a few hard hits since then. Faith seemed to be in better shape, even though she had been covered with blood. The Slayer Vampire,

however, despite her brief clash with Angel, would pretty much be in top form.

They had just passed the spot where the frigate had been docked, originally, but they weren't able to see very far along the dock because of the deep shadows surrounding the pools of light from the tall lightposts.

"Xander," Willow said, grabbing his arm. "Do you see that?"

"What?" he asked, then strained his eyes to where she was pointing.

A few spotlights ahead he did see a figure stepping into one of the pools of light. As they walked further, he realized there were two figures close to each other, supporting each other.

"That's them," he shouted.

He and Willow broke into a run. As they neared they saw that it *was* Buffy and Faith. Both Slayers looked as if they had gone a round in a Tyson fight. With several Tysons, actually. And it was hard to tell which Slayer was assisting the other.

"Are you guys all right?" they asked as they reached them.

"I thought I told you guys to get away from here," Buffy tried to make her voice firm, but didn't seem to have the strength.

"We were worried about you," Willow said, defensively. "You were gone for a long time."

"I'm sorry," Buffy said. "How's Angel?"

"He's fine. The bleeding finally stopped."

"And the vampire chick?" Xander asked.

"Dust," Faith spoke up.

He suddenly noticed just how bad the younger Slayer really looked. In fact, this time she looked worse than Buffy, and she was actually leaning against the blonde.

"Here, let me help."

He went to Faith's side and put her arm across his shoulders. The brunette didn't say a word as he pulled her away from Buffy.

"Thanks," Buffy said, then looked at Willow who was standing in front of her. "Will?"

Before Willow could say anything, Buffy fell forward and the redhead grunted as she caught her in her arms. Buffy regained some of her balance and Willow was able to help her stand. The four teenagers began to walk slowly along the dock.

"So I take it this was a hard fight," Xander said, after a while.

"Oh, yeah," Buffy said.

"We're talking Pay-Per-View worthy," Faith added.

"But you're both still alive," Xander pointed out.

"That's the important thing," Willow added. She was silent for a moment. "What about the Watcher?"

Buffy and Faith exchanged a look and she and Xander saw their expressions.

"Oh," Willow said, softly. "I'm sorry."

Willow worried about the Slayers' solemnness, and she didn't think it was all from just the fight, and fatigue. It must have been disquieting having to fight and kill a demon that was a Slayer. Seeing what would happen if either of them were turned into a vampire.

"So how are you doing?" Buffy asked her.

"Me?" she exclaimed. "I'm fine. You're the one who looks . . ." She stopped when she saw how Buffy was looking at her. "Okay. It was a little disturbing having you almost kill me. But I knew right away that it wasn't you. That it was Oranstine. I mean, you would never in a million years ever try to kill me." Then she looked at Buffy. "Would you?"

"No." Buffy smiled.

"Just double-checking."

"Xander, if you try to carry me like a baby I swear I will kick your ass," Faith said.

"Okay, okay. You just seemed kinda tired, that's all."

"I can make it," she declared.

Buffy and Willow smiled at the exchange. Then Willow's face grew serious again. "Uh, Buffy?"

"What is it?" she said, when Willow hesitated.

"Uh, back in the diner, before you guys rescued us. . ."

"Yeah?" Buffy prompted. Xander and Faith were also listening now.

"Well, Giles . . ."

"What about Giles?" Xander asked.

Willow took a deep breath and started talking as they continued along the dock.

* * * *

"Sorry about the car," Angel said.

"Don't worry about it."

Angel had been sitting on the ground with his back against the side of the Citroen. Giles and Willow had bandaged his neck before she and Xander had went in search for Buffy and Faith, but the blood covering his shoulder had left a stain on the car's door. With Giles' help he was now standing, although still leaning against the car. He said it would be best if he kept the wound as elevated as possible above his heart, to keep most of the blood in his veins away from his neck. Giles, not knowing as much about vampire first aid as Angel, couldn't argue with him, even if he still thought it was a bad idea.

"I hope they're all right," Giles said, not for the first time, sweeping his gaze across the docks again.

"I'm sure they're fine," Angel replied, not for the first time. He stood there regarding the Watcher for a moment. He knew that the man loved Buffy, probably as much as he did, but as a daughter. Giles may even know her better than Angel did. There were few relationships that bonded two people closer. Two lovers, husband and wife, brother and sister, father and daughter, Watcher and Slayer.

Being Buffy's Watcher had become more to Giles than just his duty. In some ways, he had to endure as much pain as Buffy did. When his Slayer suffered, he suffered as well. And he had also lost a lot, himself.

"I'm sorry," he finally said.

Giles looked at him. "It wasn't your fault. You did your best. That creature was just too strong. Even Buffy could not stop her by herself."

"That's not what I meant," Angel said, softly.

Giles turned his head. He took off his glasses and took a deep breath. "I know." He was silent for a long time. Angel waited for him to say something, giving the man as much time as he needed. The Watcher finally looked at him.

" *That* wasn't your fault, either."

"If there had been some way I could have stopped it--"

He fell silent when Giles raised his hand. "I know that it wasn't really you. And I'm sure Jenny knew that--" He had to stop to clear his throat. "But my heart keeps telling me otherwise. But . . . I'm sure that voice will quiet after a while. It will be just a matter of time."

Angel nodded, understandingly.

Giles turned away again, putting his glasses back on. He saw Buffy, Faith, Willow, and Xander emerge slowly from between a storage building and a high stack of crates.

"There they are," he said.

Angel tried to push himself away from the car and nearly collapsed. Giles steadied him and the vampire decided to wait for the others to come to them.

He saw that Willow and Xander were supporting Buffy and Faith as they walked. They both looked like hell, Faith probably just a little worse off, though Buffy was still nursing injuries from this morning.

As they drew nearer, Buffy eased herself away from Willow, and walked a little unsteadily toward them. He instantly recognized a determination in her stride that told him something was not sitting well with her. He wondered what it could be.

"Thank heavens you're both safe," Giles breathed with relief as they reached the car.

Buffy looked at her Watcher but walked passed him without a word and went straight to Angel. The cut above her brow was open again, and her nose had been bleeding. Faith's face had more cuts, but none of them looking as severe.

He wrapped an arm around Buffy as she hugged him.

"Noriko, is she . . . ?" Giles said.

"She's gone," Faith answered for the group. Angel noticed they were all looking at the Watcher a little strangely.

He looked down at Buffy who had her cheek buried against his chest. "What's wrong?"

She looked up at him, but didn't say anything. She pulled away and stepped to her Watcher. Giles, finally sensing the uneasiness coming from the teenagers, looked at her questioningly.

"Buffy?"

His Slayer was now standing directly in front of him. There was a fire in her eyes that Angel could not exactly call anger, but she was obviously upset about something.

"Back at the diner," she began. "What did you think you were doing?" Her voice was hard and cold.

Giles just stared at her, uncertain, as the words sank in. Then realization came to his eyes and he glanced at Willow. Willow was now lending her shoulder to Faith, who was standing between her and Xander. The redhead looked away, unable to meet his eyes. Slowly, he looked at his Slayer again, her eyes still pinning him with their gaze.

"If Oranstone had accepted your offer to let Willow and the waitress go and keep just you, tell me you weren't planning on killing yourself?" Her eyes suddenly filled with tears as she whispered, "Please. . ."

Giles had to clear his throat. "Buffy, there are, uh, certain obligations that a Watcher has. The most important one is to ensure the safety of his or her Slayer. I could not allow--" He stopped when

he saw the pain in Buffy's expression.

"You mean to tell me, that when Angel had you prisoner, when he was torturing you . . ."

Angel couldn't stop himself from flinching at her harsh words, but he knew the anger wasn't directed at him.

"If you had the chance, you would have tried to kill yourself then?"

He did try to kill himself, Angel thought, suddenly remembering something from the demon Angelus' memories. He had already tortured the Watcher for hours, trying to get him to reveal the correct ritual to awaken the demon Acathla and it had seemed Giles was ready to confess all. Angel had leaned in closer to listen to Giles' words.

`In order to be worthy,' his voice had been very weak and tired. `You must perform the ritual . . . in a tutu. Pillock!'

Of course, this had enraged Angelus beyond reason, and he actually would have killed Giles if Spike had not stopped him from putting the chainsaw to the Watcher.

But Angel kept this to himself. Right now, Buffy did not need to know this. In fact, he would never tell her.

"If it would have kept them from awakening Acathla," Giles was saying, bluntly, to his Slayer, meeting her gaze, "then, yes. I would have."

"Bullshit!" Buffy shouted at him. She grabbed him by his shirt and shoved him up against the car, none to gently. The tears were streaming down her cheeks now. "Don't give me that `Watcher's obligation' crap!"

Concerned, Angel put a hand on her shoulder, which she roughly shrugged off, but she never took her eyes off her Watcher.

"I came for you!" she declared. "Xander got you out of there while I kept the vampire's busy! None of my friends are gonna die if I can save them, do you hear!"

"Buffy--" Giles tried to say, but Buffy shook him with rage.

"No! And you will not kill yourself! I will not let that happen again!"

Now everyone, including Angel, was looking at Buffy, not knowing what she was talking about.

"Again?" Willow asked.

Buffy did not turn her attention from Giles. "Do you know what happened to Merrick? Do you know how he died?" she demanded.

"I know he was killed by the vampire lord Lothos," Giles said.

"No! Lothos didn't even touch him!" Buffy was shouting again. "Lothos

had me under his spell! He would have taken me! But Merrick had a gun and distracted him so I could get away! I ran away while he faced a vampire alone, with a gun! But Lothos didn't get him because he saved the last bullet for himself!"

Angel saw the stunned expression come over Giles' face. He opened his mouth but was speechless.

"You are not going to do that!" Buffy told him. Then it seemed as if all her anger was spent and she sagged against his chest. "I won't let you do that!"

"I never," Giles started to say. "I didn't realize . . ." The Watcher put his arms around Buffy as she cried into his shirt.

"Promise," Buffy said. "You promise me, that no matter what happens, you will always wait for me." Buffy was pleading now. "I will find you. I will rescue you. Just promise me."

Angel just stood there, wanting to comfort her, and knowing that he couldn't. Not this time. He glanced at the others, standing together, also watching in silence. They knew this was between Buffy and Giles, but their emotions were evident on their faces. Willow's face was damped with tears. There were no tears in Faith's eyes but she actually looked closer to tears that Angel could remember.

"Promise me." Buffy's voice had dropped to a whisper.

Giles was fighting the tears in his own eyes, but he lost when one ran down his cheek. He managed to keep his voice steady.

He gently told his Slayer, "I promise."

End of Part Twenty

A TALE OF SLAYERS Epilogue

EPILOGUE

After.....

Buffy had taken Angel home so the vampire could replenish the blood he had lost. Knowing Angel did not like having humans around while he fed, Buffy assured the others she would be fine taking him by herself.

"Now when you say you're taking him home to feed," Xander had said, "you're not going to offer yourself as an appetizer, right?"

Buffy rolled her eyes and informed him that Angel kept a refrigerator well stocked with nonhuman blood. Giles had told her to be careful, especially, in her current condition. Buffy nodded and opened her mouth to say more, but then closed it again when no words would come to her. After telling him she would meet them back at the library, they drove off, in different directions, away from the now quiet docks.

Even though she wasn't feeling very strong right now, she insisted on helping Angel inside the mansion, who was still weaker than she was. She led him to his bedroom and helped him out of his bloodied, coat

and shirt. She replaced the dressing on his wound, which was healing but still looked savagely horrid, and cleaned the dried blood off his skin.

She left the room to get the blood from the refrigerator, giving him privacy to finish undressing. As instructed, he was sitting up in bed, under the covers when she returned. She set the 32 ounce plastic cup, with sealable lid, on the night stand, within his reach, and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"No straw?"

Buffy looked at his impassive expression and couldn't fight the grin that spread on her face. "Somebody's getting spoiled. You must have really lost a lot of blood if you think I'm gonna be babying you again until you get better."

He tilted his head as if disappointed, even though he didn't know how to pout. The only person who had fewer expressions was Oz. He indicated the cup. "A couple of these and I'll be fine."

Buffy eyed the cup. "I'm definitely not gonna be able to look at a 'Big Gulp' the same way ever again. And I didn't know how much to warm it up, I figured you wouldn't want it cold, but I didn't want the cup to melt either, I guess vampires wouldn't want cold blood, since when they feed on a human their blood is pretty warm, not that you like drinking warm blood because it reminds you of feeding off . . . just that it tastes," she frowned at her own words, "better."

Angel was just looking at her, his eyes soft.

"Oh, I know." she groaned. "I'm babbling." She put a hand to her forehead. "It must be the concussion I don't know I have, yet. It's making me all--"

"Go talk to Giles," Angel simply said.

"I don't think I can face him right now." She shook her head, letting her eyes fall. "The way I blew up at him. . ."

"It's what you were feeling," he told her.

"He probably thinks I've finally lost it. His next entry in his diary will probably read, 'And today the Slayer blew out her porchlight. I think I'll make some tea.' "

"You know he doesn't think that. He understands."

Buffy let her eyes wander the room. "I don't know. I just can't imagine my life without Giles being there." She looked at him. "Any more than I can be without you."

Angel took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"He gives so much and I just take and take. How does he put up with me? And now he has to look after Faith, too."

"You don't think he can do it?" he asked.

"He *is* doing it. I just don't know how he's doing it. Faith is more of a handful than I ever was." She looked into his eyes. His expression was still the same. "Don't look at me like that. I'm really not as bad as Faith." His expression remained the same. "Okay, okay! Maybe I did give him a hard time. But that was a long time ago. I've grown since then, had time to mature," she insisted.

She looked at him and they were silent for a long moment.

Finally, she said, "I'll go talk to Giles." He nodded. "And I should go so you can eat. I can hear your stomach growling." She leaned down and gave him a quick kiss on the lips.

She stood up and walked over to the heavy curtain covering the doorway. He still made no move to reach for the cup. Buffy looked over her shoulder. "I'll check on you tomorrow."

"I'll be here," he said.

"Don't get too excited. I didn't say I would be here early." She gave him a smile. "As soon as I get home, I think I'll fall into a nice coma."

"Good night," he said as she disappeared through the curtain.

* * * *

Throughout the entire ride back to the library, Giles had not said a word. In the back seat, Willow and Xander were also quiet. Without any idea how to break the uncomfortable silence, Faith remained quiet as well. It wasn't until they entered the library that Giles spoke up, asking Faith to go to his office so he can look over her wounds. The Slayer just nodded and complied. She heard Willow and Xander say they'll start cleaning up the library so that it would be ready on Monday. Business as usual, she thought.

While Giles cleaned the scrapes on her face, he still said very little, except to ask if she was feeling any pain. She told him her left arm was giving her problems, and she removed her sweatshirt to let him examine it. The Watcher's touch was gentle. He wasn't "the Watcher", she thought, Giles was *her* Watcher, too. So what if Buffy had him longer, she was just as much his Slayer as B was.

And it didn't seem as if the Council was in any big hurry to assign her a new Watcher any time soon. Maybe those old folks were still adjusting to having to deal with two Slayers, she wondered. She had been in Sunnydale for six months now, living in that crappy motel room, which she didn't really mind, actually. And Giles did make sure she didn't have to worry about paying for it, and kept her stocked with plenty of weapons, and he even said nothing when his eyes would bug out at the receipts she would give him after shopping for clothes.

He pretty much gave her a lot of space.

Maybe too much, she thought. Maybe the Council decided it would be easier to just dump her with Giles. Hey, he was already here, and he was well experienced with dealing with a Slayer already, let's let him deal with the other one.

Was that what she was? she wondered. Just the other Slayer? Buffy has been a Slayer for three years, so Faith was still the new kid on the block. And did Giles feel any resentment for having her dumped into his lap? He never said anything that would make her believe that he did. And didn't Buffy tell her once that Giles had requested to the Council that he would watch over her? She couldn't really remember.

Maybe she should try to get to know him a little better. The way B knew things about him. Hell, the rest of the scoobys knew him better than she did, including Cordelia, and he was supposed to be her Watcher. He did share with her his past-experience, when he was younger, and how he and a few of his old friends had gotten in trouble with that Eyghon demon, who came after them all last year. Not that she would admit it to anyone, but he probably did save her life by stopping her from going after Oranstone and fang-girl by herself.

But then, he knew that Buffy would not be able to face them by herself, he told her as much. She couldn't help but wonder if he had stopped her from going out so that Buffy wouldn't have to fight the demons alone. She decided to put that thought out of her mind.

It turned out that her shoulder had been badly sprained, nearly pulled out of socket, Giles said. He fixed her up with a sling for the arm, despite her protests that it wouldn't go with any of her clothes. But she didn't put up too much of a fight and let him take care of her.

When he was done, Faith was trying to find the words to thank him. She wasn't really used to thanking people, was unable to recall the last time she actually told someone "thank you." But it seemed like the right time to say it. Especially to him.

That was when Buffy walked into the library. She exchanged quick pleasantries with Willow and Xander and came straight into the office, as Faith knew she would.

"How you doing?" Buffy asked, standing at the doorway.

"Giles was able to put me back together again." She indicated her new sling. "And he didn't even need all the `Queen's horses and all the Queen's men.' "

"And if I tell you to take it easy for the next few days, will I be ill-advised not to worry that you'll do something to aggravate your injuries?" Giles asked.

Faith gave him an innocent look. "Do I look like somebody who wouldn't listen to her Watcher?" Faith couldn't help but put a little emphasis on `Watcher.'

"Do you really want me to answer that or should I just glare?" Giles said, with a minute trace of a smile.

Over his shoulder she saw Buffy smile knowingly at the remark, and gave Faith a look that told her she heard this before. It made her feel a little better.

"So we're done?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good." Faith headed for the door but picked up Giles' weapon bag with her free hand. "I'll just put away the rest of the arsenal."

"That's all right. I'll take care of that," Giles assured her.

"No. It's no problem."

Buffy stepped further into the office to allow Faith to leave.

When Buffy was sure Faith would not be able to hear them, she met Giles' eyes. Before she could say anything, however, he motioned her to sit down. She did so and he immediately started to clean the bruises on her face. After cleaning the cut on her brow, he used a butterfly Band-Aid to keep it closed.

"Buffy--"

"Giles--"

They said at the same time. They smiled at this. Giles let her go first.

"Giles, I'm sorry I blew up on you out there," she said sheepishly. "And in front of everyone."

"And I am sorry, too." At the looked she gave him, he continued. "I should have known more about the details of Merrick's death."

"Please don't be mad at Willow. She was just worried--"

"I know. And I'm not. She's a good friend and she felt that she should tell you. And she was probably right in doing so." He removed his glasses. "She usually is, about these things."

Buffy was silent for a moment. Then in a more serious tone. "But I did mean everything I said out there."

Giles met her eyes. "I know."

"I just don't think I could go through that again." She rolled her eyes as tears started to form. "Look at me. It seems there's a lot I can't go through again. I was barely able to make it through them the first time."

"But you did," he told her. "You made it through. We were here to help you. Willow. Xander. Myself. We will always be there for you, Buffy. The same way you've always been there for us."

"I lost Angel, but somehow I got him back. If I lose you, Giles, I can't get you back."

"Well, I'm not planning on going anywhere."

They sat there in silence for a moment. Then he put his glasses back on. "We really should call it a night. It's been a rather interesting

twenty-four hours." He glanced at his watch and frowned.

"What?" Buffy asked.

"It's almost five minutes to the time the Council called me last night to inform me of Noriko's activation as a Slayer."

"She was only a Slayer for just one day."

"No, Buffy," Giles said, softly. "The young girl who was Noriko died when she was turned into a vampire. She was never a Slayer."

"So when we killed the Slayer Vampire, her death won't activate another Slayer?"

"I don't believe so. As a vampire she was already dead."

"Oh. But she still cared about her Watcher," she told him. "Even as a vampire, her whole motivation was to keep her Watcher with her. That's something we have in common."

"They can both rest, now."

She nodded. She stood and headed for the door as Giles put away his first aid materials. She stopped and looked back at him. "You'll remember your promise, won't you?"

He nodded. "I shall." Giles prayed he would be able to keep that promise to her.

It really didn't take much time putting the weapons away, considering that they had used most of them up earlier. She was just closing the book cage when she saw Buffy and Giles step out of his office. Willow and Xander had also finished putting the rest of the books back in place and came down the stairs to join them.

"We've made this place as presentable as we could," Xander commented. "Ready for school on Monday. But I doubt anyone will notice since we're probably the only ones who come in here."

"Well, you all did an excellent job tonight," Giles said, putting on yet another tweed jacket. Three jackets in one night. Faith wondered if that was a personal record for him. "And I for one am looking forward to a Sunday spent in bed."

"Curled up around a good book?" Willow asked.

"I'm sure I'm bordering on blasphemy when I say, I would rather not see another book for the rest of the weekend."

Buffy raised her eyebrows at the comment. "Boy, Giles. That didn't hurt, did it? You definitely need to lie down if you're starting to talk crazy like that."

"Yes," the Watcher said. "Anyway, can I give anyone a ride home?"

"B, you're going to pick up your mom, right?"

"Yeah. And then there's still that demon puddle I need to scrub off

the floor of my house."

"Mind if I come with you?"

"No. I could use the company." She smiled. "And this way Mom can see that you look as bad as I do, this time."

"Then I'll take Xander and Willow home." Giles looked at the other two teenagers.

"I still need to call Oz and tell him everything went all right with the slayage," Willow said. "He doesn't show it, but he really is an old worry-wart."

"And be sure to tell him how you took down that vampire single-handedly," Buffy told her, and the redhead beamed with pride. "I'll see you Monday, Giles," Buffy said.

"Monday," he said. "Sleep well."

"I'll be right there, B," Faith told her as the blonde Slayer started for the door. Buffy nodded.

Faith looked at Willow and Xander.

"Hey," Xander said, to Giles. "Will and I will wait for you in the car." They quickly followed Buffy through the double doors.

Faith watched the doors close, then turned to Giles.

"Yes, Faith?"

Faith tried to find the words she wanted to say. "Look, I know we don't really know each other very well." She hesitated. Giles waited, not rushing her, even though he must be anxious to get to sleep. "Uh, you and Buffy already have a history. God," she whispered, she knew she wasn't good at this, so she just came out and said what she was thinking.

"I've already lost one Watcher to the demons, and the other one, Mrs. Post . . . Well, she was evil."

"Faith," Giles started to say, but she stopped him with a raised hand.

"I didn't say anything before --B was pretty much on a roll-- but I guess what I'm trying to say is, I would really feel bad if something were to happen to you." She fell silent, letting her words sink in.

Giles said, "I feel the same way. I mean if something were to happen to you. However, I will do my best not to let you down, Faith."

Faith nodded. "Okay. Then . . . I'll see you later."

"Of course," he smiled at her.

Faith nodded again and headed for the doors. Giles stayed behind and pulled his keys from his pocket to lock his office door. Just as

Faith was about to push through the doors, she turned to look back at him.

"Giles?"

"Yes?"

"When the Watcher's Council called, to tell you about the new Slayer," she paused. "Was Buffy with you?"

"No. I was here alone."

"So, you didn't know which one of us was dead?"

"It terrified me," he admitted. But Faith's questions were starting to concern him and he wondered where she was going with them. "Why do you ask?"

Faith met his gaze and didn't flinch away. "Who did you try to call first?"

She saw the confusion on his face then watched the realization settle in his expression. He was about to reply, but Faith stopped him. She already had her answer.

"Never mind." She tried to smile. "It doesn't matter."

She pushed through the double doors and let them swing behind her.

End of A Tale of Slayers

Began: January 20, 99 -- completed: June 9, 99

AFTERWORD

Whewwww!!!!!!! Finished at last! First of all, if you're reading this, then you finished the entire story *unless you're just one of those people who skip all the way to the end to spoil the story*. I want to thank you for reading my very first fan-fic. I hoped you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it. Oh, if you don't want to read this section I perfectly understand, it's just that I spent five months writing this story I just feel the need to talk about it a little bit.

But first, props. I like to thank the archive's Alexander whose transcripts proved invaluable to this story. It also saved me from having to dig out episodes from my own video library. And to Anya for "Misery Loves Company." It just happens to be the very first fan-fic, Buffy or otherwise, that I read. And of course to all the Buffy fan-fic writers, who this story is dedicated to, for the inspiration to actually finish my first original story.

About "A Tale of Slayers". . . .

In simple terms this is a story about the bond between the Slayer and

her Watcher. The title comes from Dickens' book "A Tale of Two Cities" which I am now ashamed to admit I have never read. I removed the "Two" because, as you know, there are three Slayers in this story, but I still need to give Dickens his due. For the story itself, I was inspired *ripped it off* by "Lethal Weapon 4" the fight scene at the end with Danny Glover and Mel Gibson against Jet Li, at the time the coolest fight in movies. But with three Slayers!!!! Oh, and it's a total coincidence that both fights take place at the docks, I had originally thought it would take place on the beach, but I had to change that when Buffy first fought the Slayer Vampire on the beach. The rest of the story took shape with having to figure out how to make a third Slayer.

Another important reason for me to write this story was that at the time there were no fanfics I could find where Faith was spotlighted. By the time this story makes the archive I'm sure there will be plenty of stories with our favorite bad girl. And, as stated before the prologue, I started writing this story before Faith turned evil, but I continued to love her even after she turned evil. Don't misunderstand, I am and always will be a Buffy's man but I love writing for Faith.

Endings..... Endings are very important to me. Sometimes an ending can make or break a story for me. When I say "ending" I mean the last few words spoken by a character, or just the last paragraph. By the time I finished writing the prologue, I already knew how this story was going to end. That last exchange between Faith and Giles, that never changed. And it also works with her eventual fall to the dark side. Not that I'm trying to ride on Joss's coat tails there, the catalyst for Faith's fall will always be her killing the deputy mayor, but maybe this will provide a little more background character for her.

Action..... Oh, yeah. What's a Buffy story without a little action. Now if someone reads this and goes away thinking it was a cool action story, cool!!!! That's a compliment. But no amount of action would mean anything to me if there isn't a story there, a reason to feel for the characters, to increase the tension of the action. I was just starting on chapter fifteen and feeling good about my fight scenes and especially my Slayer fight scenes, when "Graduation Day part 1" comes along and Joss puts me in my place and shows me how it's done. And it didn't help my confidence that two days later I saw "The Phantom Menace" and saw the BEST fight scene in a long time!

Please!!! Feel free to give me some feedback. Comments, thoughts, even if you really didn't like it. No flames. A dull candle burn, maybe.

And, once again, thank you for reading it. And I apologize for my ego-trip.

I think I'm gonna go read a "A Tale of Two Cities" before I start on my next fic.

Peace.

End
file.